

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ANNA ZAIRES

— ❄ —
A dangerous man.
A desperate woman.
Who will prevail?
— ❄ —

BEAUTIFUL
MOLOTOV BETROTHAL BOOK 2
CHAINS

BEAUTIFUL CHAINS

MOLOTOV BETROTHAL: BOOK 2

ANNA ZAIRES

♠ MOZAIKA PUBLICATIONS ♠

CONTENTS

Prologue

1. Alina
2. Alexei
3. Alina
4. Alina
5. Alexei
6. Alina
7. Alexei
8. Alina
9. Alexei
10. Alina
11. Alexei
12. Alexei
13. Alina
14. Alexei
15. Alina
16. Alexei
17. Alina
18. Alexei
19. Alina
20. Alexei
21. Alina
22. Alina
23. Alexei
24. Alina
25. Alina
26. Alexei
27. Alina
28. Alina
29. Alexei
30. Alina

31. [Alexei](#)

[Excerpt from Twist Me by Anna Zaires](#)

[Excerpt from White Nights by Anna Zaires and Charmaine Pauls](#)

[About the Author](#)

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is purely coincidental.

Copyright © 2023 Anna Zaires and Dima Zales

www.annazaires.com

All rights reserved.

Except for use in a review, no part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission.

Published by Mozaika Publications, an imprint of Mozaika LLC.

www.mozaikallc.com

Cover by Alex McLaughlin

Photography by Regina Wamba

www.reginawamba.com

e-ISBN: 978-1-63142-862-3

ISBN: 978-1-63142-863-0

PROLOGUE

ALEXEI

25 Years Earlier, Moscow

“— and that’s when the young prince saw the beautiful princess.”

Mama pauses in her reading, and I shift uncomfortably, my bottom sore and aching from Papa’s belt. She glances at me and pushes herself up to sit straighter against the piled-up pillows. Her mountain of a belly moves with her, as big as the tower in the book she’s reading.

It’s so big *I* might be able to fit in there, and I’m already five. Or if not me, then my little brother, Ruslan. He’s only three.

“Want me to stop reading so you can go play?” Mama asks softly as I lay my hand on that huge belly in the hopes of feeling my baby sister kick. She does that a lot lately.

“No, keep going,” I say and nestle closer to Mama. She’s been on “bed rest” forever, ever since my baby sister crawled into her stomach and made her sick. Because I’m grown, I remember a time when things were different, when Mama bathed us and played with us, but Ruslan doesn’t. He thinks it’s always been like this, that Mama has always been this

unmoving mound of a person who can kiss us, and read books to us, and that's about it.

Mama smiles and wraps her soft arm around me as she turns the page. "All right, darling, let's continue." Her voice takes on the dramatic cadence I love. "The princess lived in a tower surrounded by dragons. Her father, the king, locked her in there because he wasn't a nice man. He didn't care that the princess wasn't happy living there all by herself, so when the young prince came to ask for her hand in marriage, the king refused. He said—"

"Why did he refuse?" I interrupt. I've asked this before—Mama has read this story to me many times—but I still want to hear her answer. "And why was he not nice?"

What I really want to know is whether the king used his belt to punish the princess, the way Papa does with me and Ruslan. But that question might upset Mama, and her doctor said she's not allowed to get upset or she'll die. That's why I haven't told her that Papa punished me today for breaking the old Chinese vase in the living room. She doesn't like it when Papa uses his belt, and she also doesn't like it when I behave badly. I actually wasn't at fault this time, but I can't tell her that without Papa finding out the truth. It was Ruslan who broke the vase, but when Papa asked us about it in that scary voice of his, my brother started crying and I told Papa that I did it.

I'm bigger and stronger, so the belt doesn't hurt me as much.

"The king refused because he didn't think the young prince was good enough for his daughter," Mama replies, giving me the same answer as before. "As to why the king wasn't nice, well, darling... some men just aren't. They're born that way."

Like Papa.

I want to say that, but it might upset Mama. She doesn't like it when anyone says anything bad about him. I know because she fired Kristen, our American nanny, for calling Papa "abusive." I don't know what that means, but it must be bad because Mama liked it that Kristen was teaching us English. Now Ruslan and I don't have anyone to speak English with except my toy soldiers, and they don't know it any better than I do.

"Ready to continue?" Mama asks, and I nod eagerly.

This is my favorite story, and even though I know every word and have learned to read it by myself, I like how Mama tells it best.

With a sigh, she keeps reading. "He said, 'You are not worthy of my daughter. If you truly want her hand in marriage, you must first slay every dragon around her tower.' The king knew the young prince wouldn't be able to do that. There were dozens upon dozens of dragons—" She stops abruptly, and I feel her stiffen.

Worried, I sit up to look at her. "Mama?"

She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. "I'm okay. It's okay. Come here." She pats the blanket, and when I'm curled up against her again, she continues. "There were dozens upon dozens of dragons, each scarier than the next, and only the bravest, strongest man would be able to fight them—and even *he* would eventually lose."

"But the young prince didn't lose," I say, excitement fizzling through me. I know where the story is going, and it makes me want to jump up and down on the bed. I don't do it,

though. The doctor said if I jostle Mama too much, she will die and so will my baby sister.

Mama stiffens again, and when she speaks, her voice sounds different. Strained, like she's having trouble going number two. "No, he didn't lose. It took him many years, but he—" She groans and attempts to sit up higher against the pillows. "Darling, please get—ahhh!"

I jerk away to stare at her. Her eyes are scrunched shut, and her face is greenish-white, twisted into a grimace as she clutches her mountainous belly. All of a sudden, I feel the way I do when Papa gets mad at me: all sick and shaky inside.

"Mama?" My voice goes higher. "Mama, are you going to die?"

She clenches her teeth and opens her eyes. Her voice still has that strange, strained quality to it. "No, no, darling. Just go get Papa, please. I think... I think it might be time."

I scramble toward the edge of the bed, but the blanket tangles around my legs, slowing me down. I yank on it in frustration, partially pulling it off Mama. My hand touches something wet. *Eww. She peed herself.* Except when I lift my palm, it comes away pink and red. Red like blood. I leap off the bed, my heart like a moth in a jar, all beating wings and panic.

Papa. I need to get Papa.

Mama cries out again, and I throw a frantic glance over my shoulder as I sprint for the door. She's still clutching her stomach, her face scrunched in pain.

Don't die, Mama. Please don't die.

I dash out of the bedroom and down the hallway, screaming for Papa at the top of my lungs. Sobs threaten to rip

from my throat, but I swallow them down because Papa punishes me when I cry. He also punishes me when I enter his office without knocking, so I pound my fist against the closed door, ignoring the waves of pain it sends up my arm.

All I can think is that Mama might be dying.

“Not now! I’m busy.” Papa’s voice is gruff, annoyed. Normally, that would be enough for me to slink away and approach him another time, but this can’t wait.

“It’s Mama,” I yell, pounding harder. “She said to get you. Her bed is wet and red!”

The door opens inward so fast I lose my balance and fall in. Inside the office is Papa and a blond woman I don’t know. She’s naked and bent over his desk, her pale skin laced with pink welts of the kind I get after he belts me.

For a second, all I can do is stare at her from where I fell onto the floor. Papa clearly punished her, but why? Who is she? Why is she naked? He uses his belt on me through my clothes. Also, why are Papa’s pants unzipped?

Then I remember Mama, and panic swamps me again. I bounce to my feet as Papa utters a foul curse and zips his pants, then pushes past me and hurries down the hallway to the bedroom.

I spare the naked woman another lightning-fast glance—she’s on her feet now, her face all red—and run after Papa. I make it to the bedroom just as he lifts Mama off the bed. Her eyes are squeezed shut, and both of her hands are cupping her huge stomach, like she’s afraid it’s going to fall off. On the bed, more of the blanket has turned that awful red color, and so has the bottom of her white nightgown.

“Mama?”

She moans in reply. Ignoring me, Papa carries her out of the bedroom, bellowing for our driver.

I sprint after them. My heart is doing that moth thing again, and I'm having trouble breathing as the sobs pile up inside my throat, choking me.

Don't cry. Papa doesn't like it when you cry.

Mama lets out an agonizing wail. Papa swears and picks up his pace. A few seconds and he's through the front door, not even bothering to pull on his jacket. I run out into the hallway after him, but he's already disappearing into the elevator.

The last thing I see as the doors slide shut is Mama's gray-green face, twisted in pain as she screams over and over again.

MAMA DOESN'T COME HOME THAT NIGHT. NEITHER DOES PAPA. I lie in my racecar bed, reading the princess story to myself over and over again. Jeanette, our new French nanny, looks in on me, but before she pokes her head in, I turn off my lamp, pull my blanket over my head, and pretend to be asleep. She quietly closes the door and tiptoes away.

As soon as she's gone, I turn the lamp back on and resume reading. It's my favorite story because by the end, the young prince slays all the dragons. It takes him years, but he wins the beautiful princess's hand in marriage and, best of all, her love.

Someday, I will also meet a beautiful princess, and when I do, I won't stop until I slay every dragon keeping us apart.

I fall asleep sobbing, but Papa is not there to see it, so he can't punish me. In the morning, Ruslan climbs into my bed,

asking about Mama, and I tell him she's dead. I know what death is because when I was just a little older than Ruslan, Papa took me to a farm and had me kill a chicken. I cut its throat with a knife as it squawked and beat its wings to get away. There was a lot of red that time—blood, like on Mama's bed—and the chicken didn't move again. We cooked and ate it.

I don't think Papa is going to cook and eat Mama, but I think she must be like that chicken now, all still and lifeless, her blood in a red puddle around her. Papa said that could happen when my baby sister came out of her, and before I went to bed yesterday, I overheard Jeannette talking to our cook about what happened—something about placental abruption, Mama losing too much blood during an emergency C-section, and the baby needing to stay in the hospital until after the funeral.

I explain all this to Ruslan, and he starts crying. I want to cry too, but I swallow the burning sobs bubbling up my throat. Grabbing the book, I open it to the front page and begin to read to my brother, trying to sound as much like Mama as I can even though my voice keeps breaking.

Ruslan eventually stops crying and falls asleep, but I continue reading, my lips moving soundlessly, shaping the familiar words. I read until the choking, burning feeling in my throat fades and Mama's screams no longer ring in my ears. Until the image of her, as still and lifeless as that chicken, is replaced by the picture in the book—the drawing of the beautiful black-haired princess.

A princess whose love I will win one day, no matter what it takes.

CHAPTER 1

ALINA

For the second day in a row, I wake up to bright sunlight and the sound of ocean waves. This time, however, I know exactly where I am: on Alexei's yacht, somewhere in the middle of the ocean. Which ocean, I don't know, but now that my head is clearer, I can venture a guess. My brother's mountain compound, from which Alexei stole me two days ago, is in Idaho, the western part of the United States, so unless my captor flew me all the way across the North American continent while I was drugged, this is more likely to be the Pacific.

Gingerly, I turn my head. I'm alone in bed, though the pillow next to me bears an indentation of Alexei's head, and his scent lingers on the sheets. Pine and a hint of leather, overlaid with the salty tang of the sea and something that's uniquely male and his.

It's a scent I'm now intimately familiar with.

Heat suffuses my body as memories of yesterday flood in, and I jackknife to a sitting position, holding the blanket against my naked chest. Instantly, I wince. My inner thighs feel like I've attempted Olympic-level gymnastics, and I'm painfully sore deep inside. On instinct, I touch my head. My hair is still damp from last night's shower. Alexei didn't give me a chance

to dry it before carrying me back to bed, where he wrapped his big, muscular body around me and promptly went to sleep, leaving me to stare numbly into the darkness, too tired to process the horror of his intentions but too wired to drift off.

At least he didn't fuck me for the fourth time last night. Got to be grateful for small mercies.

Carefully, I slip out of bed, pull on a robe, and pad into the bathroom. My pulse is racing, last night's numbness having fully worn off. On autopilot, I go through my morning routine—shower, brush my teeth, blow-dry my hair, apply my makeup—and the entire time, all I can think about is what my captor said last night.

A child. That's what he wants from me. A child to replace the one my brother took away from his family—Slava, the boy Nikolai unknowingly fathered with Ksenia, Alexei's recently deceased sister. Last night, Alexei fucked me three times without a condom, and he intends to do it over and over again, until he succeeds in tying me to him with a chain more unbreakable than any contract: a bond of blood.

It's a cruel, utterly Machiavellian plan—and exactly what I should've expected from a man like Alexei Leonov, who manipulated my father into arranging our betrothal when I was barely fifteen.

That's another revelation from last night. Alexei was the one responsible for that medieval contract, not our parents like I'd thought all those years. He wasn't a victim of our fathers' greed and hunger for the ultimate alliance, a nineteen-year-old boy who'd just gone along with his family's wishes. Oh, no. He was always the mastermind behind it all, the puppet master pulling all the strings. If my father hadn't agreed to the betrothal, Alexei would've stolen me from my family and kept

me locked up like a princess in a tower until I was “old enough.”

His obsession with me goes far beyond anything I’d imagined, and I have no doubt he intends to keep his word about forcing a child on me. After all, this is the same man who’s killed every boy and man who’s so much as looked at me.

By the time I complete my routine, the face that peers at me from the mirror is cool and composed, with makeup covering the worst of the whisker burns on my jawline and along my neck. My lips are still puffy from Alexei’s bruising kisses, but with my signature red lipstick painted on, it’s as if a skilled surgeon has given me a touch of filler.

I look like myself, even though my body feels like that of a stranger.

I half-expect Alexei to be in the bedroom, waiting for me as he did yesterday, but the room is empty when I come out. Feeling incalculably grateful, I hurry to the closet and get dressed, pulling on one of the many designer cocktail dresses my captor has procured for me. There are also more casual, comfortable clothes—shorts, T-shirts, soft cotton sundresses—but I have no intention of being comfortable here, with him.

A pair of strappy designer heels completes my look, and then... I don’t know what to do. Do I stay in the cabin, waiting for him to appear? Or do I go out there and expedite the inevitable confrontation?

My stomach makes the decision for me by emitting a loud growl. I have no idea what time it is, but my last meal—just a few bites of the lavish spread Alexei’s cook, Vika, prepared for us—was at some point yesterday, long before the sun went down. Was it lunch? A very early dinner? No idea, but my

body is convinced it's starving. Already, I can feel a headache building, the pressure gathering to squeeze my temples in a familiar vise. Of course, in my case, that's more likely to be due to stress than to hunger, but still, a nice, solid breakfast couldn't hurt.

As I exit the cabin and head toward the stairs, I realize I'm thinking about food to stop myself from dwelling on the cold, hollow ache in my stomach, the one I get each time I think about being tied permanently to Alexei.

No, it's not hunger hollowing out my insides.

It's fear.

Fear and dread, overlaid with growing despair.

For a decade, I've run from my fate, hoping to escape it, but it's caught up to me. *He's* caught up to me—and there's no longer any chance of escape. I'm on a boat in the middle of the ocean with a monster who's made it his life's goal to have me... and now he does.

Stop it. Think about food. Only food.

Sunlight blinds me when I emerge onto the deck. It's a beautiful day, warm with just a hint of a breeze. After yesterday's storm, the air feels lighter and fresher, the sky once again a clear, brilliant blue.

Nobody is on the deck or anywhere in sight. I'm both disappointed and glad. The confrontation I've been mentally gearing up for has been postponed.

My stomach growls again, demanding sustenance, but I ignore it. I'm pretty sure the kitchen is by the nose of the boat, but I'm not ready to go over there yet. Instead, I walk over to the railing and squint into the distance, trying to figure out if

there's something out there or if my imagination is playing tricks on me.

If there's so much as a hint of land in sight, I will dive into that water, sharks and my mediocre swimming skills be damned. But there's nothing. Just blue water, extending all the way to the horizon. Whatever I thought I saw must've just been the sun reflecting off the water. Still, I stand by the railing, staring and wishing—

“What the fuck do you think you're doing?”

My captor's deep voice is low and furious, his fingers biting into my shoulder as he spins me around to face him. I'm so startled my left heel buckles underneath me, and for the second time in my life, Alexei Leonov saves me from falling—this time, possibly overboard—by gripping both of my arms.

Breathing shallowly, I stare up at his thunder-dark face as a treacherous fire kindles in my veins and spreads to my core. He's glowering at me, his near-black eyes narrowed into slits, and all I can think about is what he did to me yesterday, about the sublime mix of pain and ecstasy he wrenched from my body, over and over again.

“Were you going to jump?” he demands in the same harsh tone, his grip on me painfully tight, and I realize what he thought when he saw me... what he feared.

It's not an entirely baseless fear. Six years ago, during those dark months after my parents' deaths, I might've jumped, even with no land in sight.

A faint outline of an idea flickers into existence. Before I can think better of it, I lift my chin and ask coolly, “And if I were?”

Maybe, just maybe, if he thinks I'm suicidal, he might—

“Then I will lock you in the cabin, or better yet, chain you to my bed.”

My breath stalls in my lungs.

He's not bluffing.

He will do it.

If I push him, he will deprive me of what little freedom I have left.

Defeat is bitter on my tongue as I drop my gaze to the strong, tan column of his throat, concentrating on the portion of the tattoo visible above the crewneck collar of his black T-shirt. “I wasn't going to jump,” I say quietly. “You don't have to worry. I'm not going to kill myself.”

Not on purpose, at least. I *will* swim for it if an opportunity presents itself, but I won't leap to certain death to escape him.

His voice softens. “Alinyonok...” He releases my arms to cup my jaw. Gently, he tilts my chin up until I meet his gaze again. “Why don't you just give this—us—a chance? I have no wish to harm you. Just the opposite. You are everything I've wanted for so long... and you, no matter what you tell yourself, want me too. Stop fighting. Let me show you how good it can be between us. Unless that's what scares you? That it will be good? That you'll realize how many years we've wasted being apart?”

I stare up at him, my heart thudding painfully against my ribcage. The words, spoken in a soft, cajoling tone, land seductively on my ears, even though they're pure insanity—a delusion of the highest order.

It won't be good between us. It will be a disaster, like my parents' marriage, like everything about our relationship thus far. We are toxic together—just look at all the bodies left in our wake.

“Alinyonok, my beauty...” His voice softens further, his dark eyes gleaming with an unsettling warmth. “You know I speak the truth.”

He bends his head, and it takes every ounce of willpower I possess to slap his hand away and turn my face to the side, avoiding his kiss. Except I can't avoid it entirely. His lips, warm and soft, brush over my ear, sending erotic chills down my spine and raising gooseflesh on my bare arms, making me flush all over.

Even now, knowing what he intends, I can't stop my body from reacting to him, from responding to the raw, animalistic force pulling us together.

Heart pounding and face burning, I take a step back. Then another and another. He allows it, his mouth curling in that dark, sardonic smile of his as he watches my retreat with the patience of a predator who knows his prey has nowhere to go.

Except I do have somewhere to go. I turn and head decisively to where I believe the kitchen to be. Over my shoulder, I throw out, “I need breakfast.”

If there's one thing I know for sure, it's that Alexei doesn't intend to starve me. Even yesterday, when he had me naked in his arms, he held back his lust long enough to feed me. Today, he's sated sexually—or should be, given how many times he fucked me yesterday. Although, if he told me the truth about not having sex with anyone else since our betrothal ten years ago, it's possible those three sessions have only whetted his appetite.

A hot shiver ripples over my skin at the thought.

He falls into step next to me, his long strides easily catching up with my shorter ones. “By all means, let’s have breakfast. Though I’m not sure barging into Vika’s domain is the way to go. She tends to be territorial.”

I stop walking. “Oh?” From what I saw of the short, dark-haired woman, she seemed friendly.

“The galley is her space. Only Larson is allowed in there.”

Alexei’s tone is serious, even as amusement glimmers in his eyes. I’m pretty sure he’s fucking with me, but just in case, I say, “Okay, then how do I go about getting food around here?”

“You tell me, and I take care of it.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone, on which he swiftly types out a message. It goes out with an audible *whoosh* as I stare at the device, my heartbeat picking up pace.

A phone. A way to reach out to the outside world. Of course he has one. And so do his people. That means there are multiple devices on this boat, multiple chances for me to grab one long enough to let my brothers know—

I stop short. Know what, exactly? That I’m in some unknown waters on an unnamed yacht? Even with Konstantin’s team of hackers, that’s nowhere near enough info for them to find me. Besides, do I even want to be found? Before Alexei dragged me away in the night, I told Nikolai not to look for me because I didn’t want more blood spilled on my behalf—and I meant it. I still do, even though Alexei’s intentions are far worse than I realized. I don’t want my brothers to fight, much less die, for me. *Or for them to kill Alexei.* As soon as that thought surfaces, I shove it back down,

unwilling to analyze it in any sort of depth. Not that there's much to analyze.

I don't want anyone to die for me or kill for me. Full stop, period. And that means I can't have my brothers rescue me... especially if that rescue means Alexei will come after Nikolai's son again. In fact, now that I'm thinking more clearly, I realize I wouldn't be able to run even if an opportunity presented itself.

Two days ago, I made a bargain with Alexei, promising him that I would come with him and honor our betrothal if he called off his men and let Slava live in peace with Nikolai and his new wife. I didn't have much choice when I made that bargain, but that doesn't change the fact that I gave my word—or that the consequences for going back on it could be dire.

There's only one way forward, only one way for me to seize any control over my fate.

I tear my eyes away from Alexei's phone and meet his coolly amused gaze. "So," I say calmly, even as my stomach turns inside out. "Do you have everything ready for the wedding? I'd like it to take place today."

CHAPTER 2

ALEXEI

My pulse accelerates, and only my decade of experience negotiating business deals with ruthless rivals enables me to conceal my shock. She wants to marry me? Now? Today?

But no. As I look deeper into those jade eyes of hers, I see the truth.

My Alinyonok hasn't decided to come around and accept me. On the contrary—this is a new ploy, a way to welsh on our bargain while honoring it on paper. The wedding won't mean anything to her. As soon as our vows are said, she'll seek a way to escape.

I laugh, and even to my ears, it's a cold, harsh sound. There's nothing funny about this, but laughing is better than the alternative: grabbing her and using my mouth to wipe that blood-red lipstick off her lips before bearing her down onto the hard wood of the deck and fucking her right here and now, for anyone to see. She'd fight me if I were to do that. She'd fight me, and I wouldn't care. Now that I've had her, now that I've tasted her, all I want is *more*. More of her taste, her touch, her sweet orange-blossom scent. More of her tight, wet pussy wrapped around my cock, squeezing it, milking it in the throes of her orgasm.

I've lived with this craving for over a decade, but it's infinitely sharper now, almost unbearably so.

At my laughter, she draws back, her eyes flaring minutely before her chin rises in that defiant way of hers. Unlike me, she doesn't hide her feelings well. Not from me, at least. Maybe to others, Alina Molotova seems mysterious and remote, a high-society princess existing beyond the comprehension of mere mortals, but to me, she's an open book. I know how fragile she is underneath that beautiful, haughty façade, how volatile her emotions are.

If she'd let me, I'd shield her from everyone and everything, herself included. But first, I have to get through to her, destroy her illusion that she doesn't need anyone. Because she does.

She needs *me*, and I'll make her realize it, even if it takes another decade.

"Why, yes," I say, cocking an eyebrow. "We'll hold the wedding right after breakfast."

She blanches. It's subtle, the way her porcelain skin turns even paler, her slender neck tensing, but I see it, just like I see everything about her. She wants to throw me off balance, but she's chosen the wrong way to go about it. I will gladly marry her today, right here on the yacht. A big society wedding was never in the cards for us, given how her family feels about mine—and how badly my father wants a large ceremony.

It would've been his last hurrah, his final chance to show off our power and wealth before the cancer that's destroyed his pancreas devours him completely.

It's an opportunity I'm glad to deny him.

“Right after breakfast?” Alina asks in a choked voice, and I nod with a sardonic smile.

I wasn’t planning to marry her so quickly, but that doesn’t mean I don’t see the advantages.

“There are a few white dresses in your closet,” I say as she stares at me, her cat-like eyes filled with a turmoil she can’t hide. “You can change into one of them.”

She scoffs, regaining some of her composure. “While you wear that?” She gestures at my casual clothes.

“I will change as well, don’t worry.” Like her, I have a closet here full of clothes for every occasion.

“I don’t care what you wear,” she says sharply. “And I’m not going to wear white. This is not that kind of wedding.”

“Oh? What kind of wedding do you think it is?” I close the small distance between us and cup her jaw. “You were a virgin until yesterday, so white is exactly right, wouldn’t you say, my beauty?”

A faint blush creeps up her cheeks, coloring them a pretty pink as she swats my hand away. “This wedding is a farce, and you know it.”

“I know no such thing.”

“Well, I do.” Staring at me defiantly, she backs away. “I’m not wearing white. Maybe black.”

“Suit yourself.”

The truth is, I don’t care what she wears. I prefer her as she was last night—naked and warm in my arms. If we were alone on the boat, that’s exactly how I’d have her all the time, including during our wedding.

I turn to go to the table underneath the overhang, where I expect Vika to serve breakfast any minute, when Alina calls out, “Wait!”

I face her, curious about her latest ploy. Sure enough, she’s eyeing me speculatively. “I *could* wear white...” She lets her voice trail off.

Here we go. “In exchange for?”

“I don’t want you touching me for at least a week.”

Her words sting like needles, even though I half-expected them. Even though I know she doesn’t mean them. At least her body doesn’t. She’s attracted to me, always has been; it’s her mind that’s placing obstacles in our path.

“No fucking way,” I say and mean it. I’ve waited more than a decade to have her, and now that I do, I’m not about to waste a single night.

She bites her lip. “Five days?”

“No.”

“Three?”

It’s my turn to scoff. “No.”

She’s beginning to look desperate. “Two? Please, I’m really sore.”

Fuck. She probably is—I wasn’t exactly gentle last night. I did my best to restrain myself, but once I was inside her, the rigid self-control I’ve cultivated over the years unraveled like a ball of yarn.

“One day,” I say grimly. “I won’t fuck you today, and that’s it.” I will do other things to her, however. I’m not

spending our wedding night without enjoying her in some way.

She looks conflicted, but then she pulls her shoulders back and nods resolutely. “Deal. I’ll wear white, and you’ll keep your hands off me.”

My poor, sweet Alinyonok. She thinks she’s won this round. I let her keep thinking that as we walk together to the table. As if on cue, Vika appears from the galley, pushing a cart ahead of her. It’s filled with every breakfast food imaginable, even though I told Vika that in the morning, Alina favors simple Russian dishes such as *grechka*, roasted buckwheat. My cook must be bored and looking to show off her skills.

I pull out a chair for Alina, and she sits in it gracefully, tucking her skirt underneath her in a smooth, fluid motion. The dress she’s chosen this morning is jewel green, matching her eyes. Held up by a thick halter strap, it’s made of some diaphanous, flowing fabric that conceals her slim curves but exposes her long, toned legs and delicate shoulders—the tops of which are starting to look a little pink.

Taking my own seat, I pull out my phone and message Larson to bring us some sunblock. In the meantime, Vika sets all the dishes on the table as Alina oohs and ahhs over each one in an obvious attempt to flatter my cook.

“It won’t work, you know,” I say after Vika rolls the cart back into the galley. “She’s very loyal to me and my family.”

Alina is all wide eyes and innocence. “I wasn’t—”

“Yes, you were.” Despite her promises, she’s still trying to find a way out, to escape, and I won’t stand for it. Placing my hands on either side of my plate, I lean in, holding her gaze,

and say softly, “Just so you know, if you do succeed in winning over anyone on my staff, you’ll be signing their death warrant.”

Her face goes white.

I sit back and reach for the teapot Vika placed in the middle of the table. I don’t want my relationship with Alina to be all bargains and threats, but she has to understand that the game has changed. I’ve given her all the time she’s going to get—too much time. I should’ve claimed her on her eighteenth birthday, as I originally planned, but she was so sick and miserable the evening of her party that I went against my every instinct and gave her six more months.

Six months that turned into seven hellish years.

No, I don’t want to threaten her into submission, but I will. I will do whatever it takes to ensure she never runs from me again.

“Tea?” I ask calmly, lifting the pot.

She gives a tiny nod, dropping her gaze to her plate. I fill her cup with the steaming liquid before pouring coffee for myself. I don’t add any milk or sugar because I like my coffee the way she likes her tea—strong and black, unflavored by anything.

“What would you like to eat?” I ask, gesturing at the spread before us. There’s everything from various types of smoked fish to oatmeal and fruit to American-style eggs, bacon, and pancakes.

Ignoring my question, Alina picks up a pot of grechka and ladles some of the brown grain into her bowl before topping it with fruit and drizzling everything with honey.

Her attitude is undoubtedly meant to annoy me, but it amuses me instead. My Alinyonok is so predictable, a true creature of habit. Even though we've barely spent any time together, I know her likes and dislikes as well as I do my own. I know which brand of shampoo she favors and how she drinks her tea, who her friends are and what movies are her favorites. For years, I've watched her and devoured reports about her, knowing that one day, we'd end up exactly where we are: together, sharing a meal before our wedding.

Of course, I didn't know I'd have to execute a military-grade assault on her brother's compound to get us here, but oh well. Such is life.

Larson's tall, lean frame appears in my view. As usual, he's clad in his white-and-blue captain's uniform and walks with the brisk, sure stride of a man who's spent most of his life at sea. In his youth, he served in the U.S. Navy, but fate eventually brought him to Russia and into my service.

"The sunblock you requested, sir," he says, handing me the bottle. He turns to Alina and tips his cap in greeting. "Miss Molotova, good morning."

She gives him a polite smile. "Captain Larson."

Her manner is much cooler with him than it was with Vika. She's clearly taken my warning to heart.

"Thank you," I tell Larson as I open the bottle and squeeze out a generous amount of sunblock into my palm. "By the way, our wedding will take place this morning, in about an hour. You will be officiating. Do what you need to prepare."

His eyes widen slightly, but he says without missing a beat, "It will be my honor, sir."

He leaves, and I turn my attention to Alina.

“Your shoulders are burning.” I stand up and come around the table. “You need to be careful here. The sun can be brutal if your skin is not used to it.”

She blinks up at me. “Oh, I’m fine. I don’t—”

“Lift your hair. I don’t want to get any sunblock on it.”

“I can do it myself.”

“Lift. Your. Hair.”

She gives me a mutinous look but obeys, gathering her thick black hair with both hands and holding it a few inches above her neck as I set the bottle down and spread the cream evenly between my palms. Though it’s only been a few hours since I touched her all over, my heartbeat speeds up and my cock hardens as I bring my hands to her shoulders and feel her warm, silky skin. She sits stiffly as I rub the cream over her shoulders and upper back, making sure to cover every inch. When the sunblock on my hands runs out, I squeeze out more and apply it to her arms and the backs of her hands.

Her pretty, elegant hands with their glossy red nails. My hands, big and rough, dark from the sun, look like a beast’s paws in comparison.

“That’s enough. That’s plenty,” she says in a choked voice as I go for the bottle again, but I ignore her objections.

That porcelain skin of hers is not going to burn on my watch.

Her throat moves with a swallow as I squeeze out a dollop of sunblock into my palm and pat it gently onto her face. “You’re messing up my makeup,” she whispers, looking up at me through impossibly long lashes as I carefully rub the cream around her full, skillfully painted red lips.

She means it as a criticism, but I smile. I *am* messing up her makeup—and I like it. There's something perversely satisfying in ruining her perfection, in denting the artifice that covers her true beauty.

Maybe I should take away her makeup altogether. She won't like it, but I will. It will be the next best thing to having her walk around naked.

Her dress has a high neck, so her chest isn't exposed—much to my regret. Her legs, however... I crouch in front of her and apply the cream to the tops of her feet, working around the straps of her high-heeled sandals before smoothing my palms over the sleek muscles of her calves and the graceful bones of her knees. At first, she's stiff and rigid, but as I move my hands to her thighs, I feel her quiver, her breath catching audibly. My own hands are only semi-steady. Lust is riding me hard, fogging my brain and quickening my breath, stiffening my cock to the point of pain.

I want her. I want to pull apart those long, silky legs and bury my head between them, to make her scream my name as she comes, then bend her over the table and feel her wet heat clasp me, welcoming me into her body the way she'll one day welcome me into her mind and heart.

But no. Larson or Vika could come out at any minute, and besides, she's hungry. What I want to do to her—minus the fucking—will have to wait until after the breakfast and the wedding.

Clenching my teeth, I stand up and return to my seat, where I thoroughly wipe my hands on a napkin, trying not to look at her lest I lose control.

Trying and failing. My eyes keep straying to her, taking in the way she delicately presses the tips of her fingers under her

eyes, likely checking if I've smeared her mascara. I haven't—only her foundation and whatever other crap was on her skin have suffered—but she looks unsettled anyway. I've thrown her off balance, I realize as I watch her pat her face, trying to distribute the sunblock more uniformly over her cheeks and jaw, to blend it with what remains of her makeup.

My Alinyonok doesn't like looking imperfect in front of me—or more likely, anyone.

I tuck away that observation, adding it to my arsenal of facts about her. It's an incomplete arsenal, one that's based on remote observation rather than first-hand knowledge. Though I feel like I know her and understand her, the reality is that we've had very few in-person interactions over the years.

In fact, we've spent more time together over the past twenty-four hours than in the entire eleven years preceding them.

She begins eating, and I do the same, making quick work of three eggs and a portion of smoked Chilean sea bass with a side of fresh cucumbers. She is only a quarter way through her grechka by the time I'm done. I pour myself another cup of coffee, and then I sip it, watching her, enjoying the graceful arc of her hand as she brings each spoonful of grain to her mouth, the flexing movement of her finely defined jaw as she chews, the ripple of her swan-like throat as she swallows. Before meeting her, I didn't know it was possible to be fascinated by something as mundane as a person eating, but at that dinner in her father's penthouse eleven years ago, I found my eyes returning to her again and again as she picked at her plate, her beautiful face set in the mutinous expression I've since gotten to know so well.

She hadn't yet turned fourteen that evening, and I, a grown man of almost nineteen, found myself mesmerized, utterly entranced by her.

She looks up from her meal, catching me staring, and pink color sweeps over her face again. I don't look away. Why bother? She knows how I feel. My fascination with her that started that evening has grown into an all-consuming obsession over the years, one I've given up any hope of fighting.

"You know, you never told me why," she says, pushing away her half-finished bowl.

"Why what?" I ask, eyeing her over the rim of my cup.

Her voice is tight and a little husky. "Why you fixated on me."

"Does there need to be a reason?"

Her lashes sweep down, veiling the gem-like glitter of her eyes. "For a normal person, yes. In less than an hour, you're going to bind us together in marriage. So I want to know why. Why me? Why not some woman who actually wants you?"

"You want me." I hold up my palm when she looks like she's about to argue. "It may be only a physical desire for now, but it'll grow into more."

I'm confident of that.

Her eyes widen. "You're deluded. You actually think this"—she flaps her hand over the table between us—"is going to turn into some kind of love story?"

"Why not?"

She gapes at me, then gives a sharp, incredulous laugh. "You're serious, aren't you? You actually think you can force

me to care about you.”

“Of course I can.” I set my cup down and lean in, capturing her gaze. “We’re going to spend the rest of our lives together, Alinyonok. Each night, I’m going to give you pleasure, and each day, I will take care of your every need. I will fill you with my seed, and eventually, you will birth our child. Maybe more than one. We will be a family, and you *will* grow to care for me—because I’m not giving you a choice. Not any longer.” And as she stares at me, her face pale, I add softly, “Fight me all you wish, my beauty, but you won’t win. I’ll make sure of that.”

CHAPTER 3

ALINA

My hands are still shaking as I flip through the row of dresses hanging in the walk-in closet, looking for a white one. I couldn't eat a single bite after Alexei's ruthless declaration, and my stomach feels cold and hollow again, my insides twisted in knots. I wish I had a joint or two, but there's nothing here to take the edge off the anxiety consuming me.

One night. That's all this dress will buy me. One night during which he won't touch me.

It's not enough. Not nearly enough. When Alexei turned away after I refused to wear white, it occurred to me to count the days since my last period. I can't remember the exact day it started, only that it was mid-week—and I don't know how long I was unconscious while Alexei transported me here—but I'm reasonably sure that I'm approaching the middle of my cycle.

As in, a woman's most fertile time.

If he'd agreed not to touch me for a week, I might've been safe—for this month, at least. But a single night will accomplish nothing. I need to figure out a way to keep him away from me for at least the next few days. But how? I have so little leverage over my captor. The white dress was

something he seemed to want, so I played that card the best I could. Now I need to come up with something else, something he'd be willing to bargain for.

Of course, all of this presupposes that I'm not already pregnant.

“Need some help?”

Alexei's voice makes me jump. Heart pounding, I spin around and meet his darkly amused gaze.

He stands at the entrance to the closet, one forearm propped on the doorframe just above his head. He's already dressed for the wedding, having swapped his casual T-shirt and jeans for a tuxedo suit and a bowtie. The sleek black jacket hugs his powerful torso, accentuating the breadth of his shoulders, and the crisp white shirt underneath contrasts beautifully with his olive-hued skin and black hair.

He looks equal parts intimidating and breathtaking, and I hate him for it—nearly as much as I hate my body's involuntary reaction to him.

“You seem to be having trouble finding a dress,” he says with a sharp-edged smile, nodding toward the rack of clothes behind me. “Perhaps I can be of service?”

I grit my teeth, willing my breath to even out. “No, thanks. I've got it.”

To demonstrate, I turn and yank off a hanger the first white thing I see—which turns out to be a long-sleeved linen tunic.

Fuck.

Then again, who says I need to look like a proper bride? Our agreement was for a white dress, and this is a white dress. The kind I wouldn't be caught dead wearing anywhere but

poolside over a bikini, but still... Smiling triumphantly, I turn back to face my intended, holding out the tunic in front of me.

At the expression on Alexei's face, the smile drops off my face.

"I don't think so." His voice is dangerously soft. "I'm not explaining that to our grandchildren when they ask to see our wedding pictures."

He advances on me, making my heart leap, only to stop a foot away. Reaching behind me, he pulls out an evening gown. Made of heavy white satin with silvery threads woven vertically through the square-cut bodice, it's equally suitable for a wedding or for a high-end gala.

"You'll wear this," he says, thrusting the dress at me. "Or else our deal is off."

So much for that little victory. Clenching my jaw, I hang the tunic and take the dress from him. What choice do I have? He holds all the cards in this fucked-up game of ours, dictates all the moves. As much as I want to fight him on this, I can't—not without giving up what little ground I've gained.

After all, one sex-free night is better than none.

Clutching the dress against my chest, I tip my head back and meet his gaze with the haughtiest look I can muster. "You can leave now. I've got it from here."

Though my voice is steady, my heart beats unevenly. He's too close to me, his body too tall and muscular, his presence too overpowering in the small space of the walk-in closet. It feels like he's commandeering all the air around me, leaving no oxygen for me to breathe. I try anyway, forcing my lungs to drag in a full inhale, and my body ignites like lint in a fireplace, memories of yesterday playing out in graphic detail

in my mind as I catch a faint whiff of his masculine scent—that strangely appealing mix of pine, leather, and salty sea.

For years, this man haunted my darkest nightmares and my most erotic dreams, yet my imagination still underestimated the magnetic reality of him.

He senses my weakness. He must because his eyes grow hooded, the tight line of his lips morphing into a sensual, softly mocking curve. “And if I don’t wish to leave?”

I swallow, acutely aware of the damp heat gathering between my legs and the aching tightness of my nipples inside my bra. “You promised.”

“Not to fuck you, yes.” His eyes glint. “I never said I wouldn’t look.”

I take a shaky step back. “I’m not changing in front of you.”

“Why not?” He runs his gaze over me, and when his eyes meet mine again, his irises are nearly black. “I’ve already seen everything.”

“Because...” I rack my brain in desperation. “Because it’s bad luck for the groom to see the bride in her dress before the wedding.”

It’s the stupidest reason ever, this superstition that can only apply to couples who have some hope of a good, happy marriage, but it’s the best I can come up with. I can’t tell him the truth—that just standing here, I burn. That if he breaks his word and touches me, I might go up in flames.

The mocking curve returns to his lips. “Really, Alinyonok? You think ‘luck’ is a factor with us?”

“I do.” That’s my excuse, and I’m sticking by it.

He inclines his head. “Very well. I’ll be waiting for you on the deck.”

And with that, he walks out, leaving me feeling relieved... and strangely disappointed.

CHAPTER 4

ALINA

I drag out my preparations for as long as I can, carefully fixing my makeup, styling my hair, choosing the perfect underwear for the dress—not that anyone but me will see it. I contemplated taking a second shower as well, but I decided against it.

If Alexei notices that I washed off the sunblock, he'll insist on smearing it all over me again.

My skin heats at the memory of his big, strong hands rubbing the cream into my shoulders, and I squeeze my eyes shut, taking deep breaths until my pulse evens out.

It's beyond perverse, this twisted desire for his touch when it's the very thing I'm trying to avoid.

Finally, I can't delay it any longer. The mirror tells me my efforts have paid off. Despite the lack of professional help, I look like a bride should—sleek updo, flawless makeup, and all. I've even found jewelry in a delicately carved wooden box in the closet, and I'm wearing a pair of diamond earrings that complements the elegant simplicity of the white dress Alexei has chosen for me.

It's time to face the music.

As I exit the cabin and head for the stairs, I tell myself that this is what I want, that I'm the one who pushed Alexei into staging this farce of a wedding today. I'm taking control of my fate in the only way I can—by facing the inevitable head on. Once we're married, I will have held up my end of our bargain, and Slava will live safely with Nikolai and Chloe, where he belongs. That's when I'll be able to contemplate my own safety and think of ways to escape.

This wedding is a stepping stone to my eventual freedom, not something to dread.

I tell myself all this, and still, my knees shake as I step out onto the deck and see Alexei waiting under the overhang, with Larson and Vika at his side. A tall, dark-haired man is there as well, someone I haven't met. Spotting me, he lifts a chunky camera from where it hangs around his neck and snaps a picture.

Has Alexei managed to get a professional photographer on board for this?

But no. As I approach, I see that the stranger is more likely a bodyguard or a hired gun. About the same age as Alexei and with a similarly muscular build, he has a hard, dangerous look about him, the kind that speaks of close acquaintance with violence. Unlike Vika and Larson, who are still wearing what must be their uniforms, he's dressed in a sharply tailored black suit with a starched white shirt and stylish black tie. There's also something familiar about him, something about the sardonic set of his mouth and—

“Alina, meet Ruslan, my younger brother,” Alexei says as I stop in front of him and the stranger. “Ruslan, meet Alina Molotova, my bride.”

His brother? It's all I can do to conceal my shock. I've known that Alexei has a younger brother, of course, and I vaguely recall seeing a picture of the two of them together a few years back, but I've never come across Ruslan Leonov at any social events. Like their recently deceased sister, Ksenia, he's stayed out of the limelight, letting Alexei and their father be the public faces of their family enterprise. Ruslan's reputation, however, is not nearly as innocuous as his sister's—just the opposite.

What is he doing on this boat? Why didn't Alexei introduce him to me yesterday?

"It's a pleasure to finally meet you," Ruslan says, though his expression implies otherwise. There isn't so much as a hint of a smile on his hard face—a face that, upon closer inspection, bears a definite resemblance to Alexei's. They have the same masculine nose and sharply cut jaw, though Ruslan's eyes are a stormy gray instead of dark brown, and his skin and hair are a shade lighter than his brother's.

"I can't say likewise," I reply, not bothering with a smile either.

I have no doubt Alexei's brother knows I'm here against my will. In fact, he likely aided Alexei in my capture.

Now Ruslan smiles, and it's all fangs. "A true Molotov, through and through. How did my brother get so lucky?"

"Ruslan." Alexei's tone is dagger sharp. "Just take the fucking pictures."

Ruslan's smile stretches. "As you wish, big brother." Stepping back, he motions for Alexei to move toward me and lifts his camera. "Say cheese."

The flash goes off before Alexei can take his place next to me. It's followed by two more flashes in rapid succession. Vika and Larson prudently back away as Alexei finally reaches me and pulls me against him, draping a proprietary arm around my waist. Another flash blinds me. I blink, and Alexei turns me to face him. Cupping my jaw with his big palm, he tilts my face up and dips his head until our lips are only an inch apart.

Flash.

Alexei's lips, soft and possessive, touch mine.

Flash. Flash.

I'm so discombobulated by what's happening I barely react as Alexei deepens the kiss, sweeping his tongue over the closed seam of my lips while pressing his hand to the small of my back to bring me flush against him. His erection molds against my stomach, hard and thick, startling me into a gasp. Instinctively, my hands fly up to grip his shoulders, and he takes advantage of my parted lips to invade my mouth with his tongue. He tastes like minty toothpaste and barely restrained male hunger, like every twisted fantasy of mine, and despite our audience, a familiar heat streaks down my spine, treacherous desire pooling deep inside my core. I forget all about the impending wedding and the bright flashes going off in the periphery of my vision, about Ruslan's obvious hostility and Alexei's terrifying plans for me.

I forget it all as I wind my arms around my captor's neck and kiss him back with the same poorly contained hunger.

It's not until Alexei tears his lips away, breathing heavily as he stares down at me with a dark, scorching gaze, that I register the rhythmic sound of slow clapping. Blinking, I turn

my head and see Ruslan applauding mockingly, the camera once more hanging around his neck.

I flush, beyond embarrassed, and push on Alexei's chest so I can take a step back. Alexei doesn't let me. Instead, he grips my hips with both hands, holding me in place, and turns his head to pin his brother with a lethal glare.

Ruslan stops clapping and lifts his camera again.

Flash.

Flash.

Flash.

"Smile," Alexei orders softly, bending his head to bring his lips to my ear, and I force the corners of my mouth to curve up, even as the heat inside me cools and dies.

This is all a sham, a mockery of what a wedding should be. No wonder Ruslan hates me. If he cares for Alexei, this can't be what he wants for him. *I* can't be what he wants for Alexei—a bride who hates her groom, a woman who had to be stolen from her family.

Everything about this is wrong. Everything is fucked up—for me *and* for Alexei.

For a second, I feel a bizarre pang of sympathy for my captor, but then I recall that he *is* my captor. Alexei orchestrated this. We didn't have to end up here—he made it happen. All of it: the betrothal when I was fifteen, the subsequent years of stalking me, the storming of Nikolai's compound, and now this travesty of a wedding. Soon, he'll also force a child on me, and we'll be a fucked-up family, our marriage doomed from the start.

We'll be like my parents, only worse. They, at least, loved each other in the beginning.

Flash. Flash. Flash.

My breath accelerates, my heartbeat pounding in my ears. Alexei shepherds me toward the rail, and Ruslan takes more pictures of us there, with the endless ocean as the backdrop. Then Ruslan hands the camera to Larson and comes to stand next to his brother, so it's the three of us.

Flash. Flash.

I'm sweating now, and despite the hot sun overhead, it's a cold, clammy sweat. There isn't enough oxygen around me, and no matter how fast my lungs work, I can't pull in a full breath. Somebody says something, the words distorted as if coming through a tunnel, and Alexei turns me to face him.

Flash.

Black spots dot my vision, and Alexei's face, dark with some emotion, swims in front of my eyes. My knees turn to jelly, and I clutch at his biceps as he grips my arms, urgently saying something I can't hear over the loud pounding in my ears.

I'm going to pass out, I realize with a distant sense of shock, and then everything goes black.

CHAPTER 5

ALEXEI

Heartrate spiking, I catch Alina as she slumps against me, her slender body going limp in my grasp.

“What the fuck? Did she just faint on you?”

I ignore Ruslan’s incredulous questions as I lift my bride against my chest and swiftly carry her below the deck, out of the blazing sun. She’s like a ragdoll in my arms, as limp as when I drugged her. Fear and worry are a tight band around my ribcage as my mind races furiously, sorting through the possibilities.

Is this a heat stroke? A belated side effect of the drug I gave her two days ago? Or—fuck—could she be sick with something?

Instead of my asshole brother, I should’ve brought along a doctor.

I head toward our cabin with long strides, and Ruslan hurries after me, as does Vika. Larson is already off—presumably to get the first-aid kit.

“Poor thing. She must have low blood sugar,” Vika says as I carefully lay Alina down on the bed, my worry skyrocketing as I note the chalky hue of her skin underneath her makeup.

“She barely had any food this morning, and yesterday, the two of you just had lunch.”

Did we?

Fuck, Vika is right. Alina had less than half of her grechka bowl this morning, and only a few bites of food yesterday in the early afternoon. Before that, she'd been unconscious for over a day, and who knows when she'd last eaten before I came for her.

Come to think of it, I don't remember Alina drinking much in the past twenty-four hours either.

“So what you're saying is my brother starved his bride after kidnapping her,” Ruslan drawls. “Like some kind of storybook villain.”

It's all I can do not to punch him where he stands. If not for Alina's condition, I would. “Shut the fuck up,” I growl at him before turning to Vika. “Get me some water, or better yet, juice.”

She nods and hurries away as Larson appears with the first-aid kit and a bunch of towels.

“We need to cool her down,” he says, approaching the bed. “In case she's overheated.”

“Here, let me.” I grab the cool, wet towels from him and place them over her chest, neck, and arms.

It's a balmy twenty-eight degrees Celsius this morning, but in the sun, it's a few degrees hotter. I think Vika's theory makes the most sense, but I can't rule out a heat stroke of some kind. Or a side effect of the drug. Or an illness. Or a combination of all of the above.

Why the fuck didn't I think to bring a doctor?

Cursing under my breath, I pull the towels off Alina and turn on the overhead fan, letting the movement of the air evaporate the moisture from her skin, drawing out any excess heat. Then I press my lips to her smooth forehead. She doesn't seem to be overly hot, thank fuck, so she's either already cooling off or it's not a heat stroke.

At my touch, Alina's long lashes flutter open, her jade eyes dazed and unfocused. Then she blinks, once, twice, and consciousness returns to her gaze.

The tight band around my chest eases slightly. "You fainted when we were taking pictures," I say, answering her unspoken question. "What happened? Do you feel sick?"

Alina blinks and lifts her hand, pressing the back to her forehead. "I... I'm not sure."

"Freshly squeezed orange juice," Vika says, appearing at my elbow with a tall glass and a straw. "Drink this. It'll help."

I grab a couple of pillows and prop up Alina as Vika brings the straw to her lips. Obediently, Alina takes a few sips and then, much to my relief, drains the entirety of the glass. Almost right away, a hint of color returns to her face, and her gaze clears further.

"Better?" I ask, and she nods, pushing up to a sitting position.

Flash.

She flinches, and I round on my brother, teeth gritted.

He gives me an angelic look. "What? You want pictures for posterity, right?"

What I want is to plant my fist in his face. Repeatedly. Until I hear the cartilage in his nose crunch. And I will do

precisely that when Alina isn't here to witness it. For now, I keep my voice level as I jab my thumb toward the door. "Out. Now."

He executes a mocking bow and departs. Accurately reading my mood, Vika and Larson hurry after him, leaving me alone with my bride.

I sit on the edge of the bed and clasp her hand in both of mine. Her skin feels chilly to the touch, her hand delicate and fragile in my grasp. "How are you feeling?" I ask softly, holding her gaze. "Any nausea? Dizziness? Headache?"

Her lashes sweep down, veiling her eyes. "I... don't think so."

"Does anything hurt?"

"No." She pulls her hand away, still avoiding my gaze. "Let's just continue with the wedding."

She moves to get up, but I grip her shoulders and push her back against the pillows.

"The wedding will wait." My voice is sharper than I intended, but I can't help it. The worry is a gnawing ache in my chest. If I've done something to hurt her, to harm her... With effort, I even out my tone. "You will eat. You will drink. And then we'll see about the wedding."

As much as I want to own her completely, I want her healthy and well even more.

"I'm fine," she says, lifting her chin in that stubborn way of hers. "I want the wedding to happen *now*."

I tilt my head, studying her. "Do you really?"

Her eyes flash a brighter shade of green. "Well, obviously not. I want to marry you about as much as I want to go

swimming with a shiver of sharks. But if I have to, then I'd rather get it over with."

I clench my teeth and remind myself that she's unwell. That I can't tear this pretty dress off her and show her what a pretty little liar she is, pretending not to want me or this marriage. Deep down, she knows she belongs to me, but still, she insists on fighting me, resisting me.

It takes everything I have to smooth out my features and say in a cool, unaffected tone, "In that case, you will eat and drink. Then, if I determine that you're well enough, we'll proceed with the wedding."

Rising to my feet, I leave the cabin.

CHAPTER 6

ALINA

I exhale, dropping my head back against the pillows as the cabin door closes behind Alexei. The truth is that I still feel a little shaky, my pulse racing too fast. Then again, that last bit could just be due to his proximity and not my Victorian-style fainting spell.

I close my eyes and take a few deep breaths. I don't know what caused me to pass out, but the orange juice did make me feel better, so maybe Alexei is right. Maybe I do need some food and water.

And not to think about my parents and how we're heading in the same direction.

I shut the door on that thought as soon as it rears its ugly head, but it's too late. My heartbeat speeds up further, and my lungs constrict with a fresh wave of panic.

Fuck. Maybe it wasn't the lack of food.

I focus on taking small, even breaths and thinking about nothing at all. When that doesn't work, I bring up images of Slava and how happy he is with Nikolai and Chloe. I remind myself that my marriage to Alexei ensures his continued happiness and safety, and the panic gradually recedes, leaving a grim resolve in its wake.

I will marry Alexei.

Today.

As soon as possible.

Then and only then will I worry about all the rest.

The cabin door opens, and Alexei enters with a tray Vika must've prepared for him. The food on it is simple: a buttered toast with a side of jelly, another glass of orange juice, and two peeled hard-boiled eggs.

"You will eat all of this," Alexei says, his expression implacable as he places the tray over my lap and sits on the edge of the bed. "I want to see you devour every crumb, understand?"

I roll my eyes. "Yes, master. I hear and I obey, master."

The corners of Alexei's mouth twitch. "Uh-huh." He picks up the toast and spoons the jelly onto one corner of it. "Open up."

Obediently, I bite into the sweet, crunchy bread. Instantly, my mouth waters for more. I don't normally eat something so sugary, but it's really hitting the spot right now.

"Good girl," Alexei murmurs, watching me intently as I swallow.

Flushing, I reach over to take the toast from him, but he doesn't give it to me. Instead, he holds it out of my reach and spoons more jelly onto another corner before bringing it to my mouth. His eyes gleam darkly as he waits to see what I will do, and I shock myself by biting into the toast as he holds it, like a pet getting hand-fed by its owner.

"That's right. Such a good girl," he says softly, and my cheeks burn hotter as he repeats the action, feeding me more

toast topped with jelly.

I should protest. I should grab the bread from him and eat it like the able-bodied adult that I am. But I don't. Something about this—the way he's watching me, how he praises me for each bite—soothes the panic inside me, quieting the voices of doom in my mind. I eat the entire toast from his hand, and when I take the last bite, my lips brush against his fingers, and it feels... sensual. Prickles of awareness dance over my skin, and his eyes grow hooded as he picks up an egg and brings it to my mouth.

This is a dangerous game we're playing, I know, but I can't bring myself to stop. I hold his gaze as I bite into the offering, no longer tasting anything as heated tension fills the air between us. His eyes grow darker, his breathing faster, and my body responds with a surge of need, my nipples peaking inside the tight bodice of my dress, my inner muscles clenching on an empty ache. Once more, there isn't enough oxygen, but the lightheadedness I'm experiencing is not the fainting kind. Instead, I feel as if I'm caught in a vivid dream, an alternate reality where it's just the two of us and nothing else matters.

“My sweet Alinyonok...” His voice roughens to a velvet rasp as I lick his fingers in the process of finishing off the first egg. “Such a good, precious girl.”

I should be embarrassed by the way I'm acting. I should stop this, tell him off. But I let him feed the second egg to me, even though I'm already full, and as he brings the glass of orange juice to my lips, I suck up the tart liquid through the straw, obeying his murmured instructions.

When the last sip of the juice is gone, he sets the empty glass on the nightstand and moves the tray off my lap and onto

the floor. Then, cupping my chin in one big hand, he presses his lips to mine.

The kiss is featherlight, lasting but a moment, yet when he pulls away, I'm tingling all over, my pulse unsteady.

"Now you're ready," he murmurs, studying my face—which, judging by the heat pulsing underneath my skin, must be a very healthy-looking pink. Leaning over, he threads one arm underneath my knees and the other behind my back and, ignoring my assurances that I can walk, lifts me off the bed with the ease of someone picking up a toddler.

Embarrassed, I hide my face in his neck as he carries me out of the cabin and up the stairs to the deck, where Ruslan is waiting with the camera under the overhang. He snaps a few pictures with me in Alexei's arms, and then a few more once Alexei sets me down on my feet but keeps a careful grip on my shoulders—presumably to steady me in case I feel dizzy.

"You okay?" Alexei asks gently, gazing down at me, and I nod, suddenly too drained to fight. I don't know if it's my passing out or the weirdness between us in the cabin, but I feel wrung out, empty in a strangely cathartic way.

As I look into the dark, magnetic gaze of the man I'm going to marry, the fear and anxiety that have tormented me for so long feel... distant. Not gone, but not as vividly present either. Or maybe it's me who's not entirely present, still caught in that dream-like state where Alexei and our future together aren't something to dread.

Satisfied that I'm not going to faint again, my husband-to-be releases my shoulders and clasps my right hand in a warm, possessive grip. "In that case, let's do this."

He faces forward, and I follow suit, noticing for the first time that Larson is already here, standing in front of us. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Vika approaching as well. Soft music begins playing from somewhere—speakers built into the walls, perhaps—and more flashes go off as Ruslan circles around us like a camera-wielding shark.

Larson begins speaking, his words reaching my ears but not really registering. Instead, they blend with the sound of the waves breaking against the hull and with the feel of the warm, salty breeze on my face.

“I do,” I say when the right moment comes, and then it’s Alexei’s turn.

“I do,” he says firmly.

Turning me to face him, he reaches into his inner jacket pocket and takes out a small velvet box that he opens to reveal two rings—a delicate diamond-encrusted platinum circle and a thicker platinum band without any stones. They’re beautiful, even if they’re just two more links in the chains with which he’s binding me to him. As I look at them, I remember the engagement ring he gave me on my eighteenth birthday. I haven’t worn it since that night, but I still have it back home in Moscow, tucked away in a safe in my penthouse. For some reason, I never got rid of it.

This wedding band complements it nicely.

My heart skips a beat, some of the dream-like feeling fading as my anxiety returns, but it’s too late. Alexei slides the diamond ring onto my left ring finger and places the platinum band onto my upturned palm—for me to fit onto him. I fumble as I do so, my fingers uncharacteristically clumsy, and he helps me, his mouth curving sardonically.

Finally, it's done.

“You may kiss the bride,” Larson announces, and Alexei grips my face between both of his palms to claim my lips in a deep, hungry kiss that leaves no doubt that I now belong to him.

That I am his possession, for better or for worse.

CHAPTER 7

ALEXEI

“Congrats, big brother,” Ruslan says when Alina excuses herself to use the restroom immediately after the ceremony, and Larson and Vika return to their duties. “You now have everything you’ve ever wanted.”

“Not everything. Not yet.” I track Alina with my eyes until she disappears below the deck, my dick hard from the kiss and my chest tight with worry. Maybe I should’ve gone with her to make sure she doesn’t pass out again. Then again, she seemed okay throughout the ceremony. Still, I should probably go check on her in case—

“Will you fucking relax? She’s fine,” Ruslan says, stepping in front of me. “So she had a little panic attack. What woman wouldn’t in her shoes? Violently abducted, drugged, forced to marry a man she hates—”

My fist meets his jaw, shutting him up for once. He staggers back and grins, revealing bloody teeth. “You’ve been itching to do that all morning, haven’t you?” He spits over the railing into the water below. “What would your new wife say if she saw that?”

“Fuck you.” If not for Alina, I wouldn’t stop with just one swing, and he knows it. When we get on each other’s nerves like this, we don’t pull punches. But a real sparring is not in

the cards today, not unless I want my wife to see that I *am* the violent savage she believes me to be.

My wife. I savor the words in my mind, even as anger at my brother boils inside me. He's been against my betrothal to Alina from the start—not that I ever asked for his opinion.

Thankfully, he seems to realize that I'm reaching the limits of my tolerance. "Father sent a message a few minutes ago," he says, his expression turning serious. "Wants to speak to you."

A grim smile cuts across my face. "Tell him I'm busy getting married."

"Gladly." Ruslan's smile mirrors mine. On this, we're on the same page. "Also, heard from Lykov. The Molotovs are kicking up a shitstorm. Already, two of our warehouses near Moscow have been raided, and there was a cyberattack on our subsidiary in Kazakhstan."

As expected. "Tell Lykov he's authorized to spend whatever he needs to boost security at all our places of operations. They'll be coming for us in any way they can."

Alina's brothers won't take the attack on Nikolai's compound and my claiming of Alina lying down. I've known that from the start. What I did was the equivalent of a war declaration, and things are about to get bloody.

"He's already on it," Ruslan says. "Also, we're going to liaise with the sub in a couple of days."

"Good."

That means Ruslan is finally heading home to take up the reins in my absence. He insisted on helping me with the operation in Idaho, but that's done and over with. So is the wedding. There's no longer any reason for him to be here, and

one of us needs to be in Moscow, overseeing our business affairs—especially given our father’s condition.

Ruslan is already turning to go when I ask quietly, “How is he?”

My brother stops and faces me, eyebrows arched. “You really want to know?” At my stony look, he sighs and says, “Doctors think he’s got weeks at this point. Maybe less.”

Something twists in my chest, like a screw burrowing deeper. Turning away to conceal my expression, I walk over to the railing and stare out at the dark blue water that shimmers calmly under the sun.

A moment later, Ruslan joins me.

“It’s not your fault, you know,” he says, his gaze locked on the horizon as I glance at him. “Nor mine. It’s on him, all of it.”

I look back at the water. “I know.”

“I’m not sure you do.”

I stay silent because what is there to say? There’s no changing the past, no fixing what’s been irreparably broken. Up until a few weeks ago, when Ruslan found our sister’s teenage diary, I was blind. Now I see it all, and the rage that consumes me is so toxic I have no choice but to stay away from Moscow until the man who sired us takes his last foul breath.

“He’s been talking about Slava again,” Ruslan says carefully. “Demanding that we take him from the Molotovs.”

“That’s not the deal I made.”

Ruslan faces me, resting one forearm on the railing. “Why did you make that deal? We’d won. A little more effort, and it

could've all been over. You could've had Alina *and* the boy.”

“Not without killing her brother.”

Ruslan led the team that took out the guards at the perimeter of the compound, so he wasn't with me by the garage. He didn't see the lethal determination in Nikolai Molotov's eyes during our stand-off. Alina's brother would've fought to the death to protect his family and keep his son. More importantly, Slava wanted to be kept. My nephew chose his father and his new wife over me, and after reading Ksenia's diary, I can't say he's made the wrong choice. If I'd known then what I know now, if Ruslan had found the diary sooner, if Ksenia had just confided in me—

“And why not kill him?” Ruslan asks, cutting into my pointless ruminations. “One less Molotov to worry about.”

I raise my eyebrows. “You know I'm married to a Molotov, right?”

“She's a Leonov now.”

Yes, she is. I can't help a surge of satisfaction at the thought. But to Ruslan, I say, “That doesn't mean she wouldn't hate me for killing her brother.”

Ruslan snorts. “She already hates you.”

No, she doesn't. I refuse to believe that. Our relationship is far from straightforward, but Alina doesn't truly hate me. I remember her sympathy at the fundraiser after Ksenia's death, the moments of connection we'd so briefly shared. On some level, she cares about me, even though I'm still essentially a stranger to her. But I won't be for long. Here, in the middle of the ocean, it's going to be just the two of us for the foreseeable future, and she'll get to know me... and grow to love me.

All I say to my brother is, “We'll see about that.”

He snorts again and faces the ocean, as do I. We stand side by side, taking in the endless blue expanse before us until the sun beaming down on our heads grows too hot to tolerate. That's when I push away from the railing and head toward the stairs.

It's time to check on my new wife.

CHAPTER 8

ALINA

I'm just about to exit the cabin when Alexei appears in the hallway, walking toward me with long, ground-eating strides.

"You've changed," he says, stopping a few feet away to rake his gaze over me.

"Why not? The wedding is over, isn't it?" I'm back to wearing the green dress from this morning. It's cool and comfortable, much more so than the long white gown.

He cocks his head, studying me. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine." And it's true, I am. I considered using my fainting spell as an excuse to stay in the cabin for the rest of the day, thus hopefully avoiding his company, but I decided against it. Not only would I be bored out of my mind, but it's best if I don't dwell on my situation too much.

On the deck, I can at least talk to Alexei's brother, get to know him a bit.

"You're sure?" Alexei asks, narrowing his eyes.

I hesitate. What will he do if I'm not fine? Take me home to Moscow?

His face tightens. "Fuck it. I'm getting you a doctor." He turns around and heads toward the stairs as I stare after him,

incredulous.

There's a doctor on board? Unless he means...

I hurry after him. "Alexei! Wait."

He stops and faces me. "What?"

"Are we docking somewhere? So I can see the doctor?"

Please say yes. Please say yes.

"No." He turns and resumes walking, disappearing up the stairs before I can press for more answers.

I follow after him, but by the time I reach the deck, he's already talking to his brother under the overhang.

"—a week's delay, at minimum," Ruslan is saying as I approach. "Are you sure it's really necessary?"

"I'll decide what's necessary," Alexei says in a hard tone. "You just get them on board."

Get who on board? How? I'm dying of curiosity, but before I can ask, Ruslan gives a curt nod and walks away, heading down below.

Alexei turns toward me, his face dark. "What are you doing up here? You should lie down, get some rest."

"I don't want to rest. I want..." I rack my brain for something innocuous to do. "I want to swim."

Alexei frowns. "You're not well enough for that."

"Says who?" The more I think about it, the more a dip in the ocean sounds appealing. It also wouldn't hurt to practice my swimming skills a bit, in case an escape opportunity presents itself. "Seriously, I'm completely fine. That was just —" I stop, not wanting to relive the memory.

Alexei's expression grows intent. "That was just...?"

"I freaked out, okay?" I inhale, fighting a sudden tightness in my lungs. "I... remembered my parents, that's all."

His face softens. "Alinyonok..."

"Don't." I don't want his pity. "Can we just swim? Please?"

He considers it for a beat, then nods. "All right. Let's go change, and I'll take you swimming."

He leads me back below deck, his hand resting lightly on my lower spine, and it's all I can do not to throw it off. Not because his touch is unpleasant. Just the opposite. There's something almost... soothing in the feel of his big hand on me. Comforting in a way I don't care to dwell on.

The peculiar sensation lingers as we walk down the stairs and back toward the cabin. I expect him to come in with me, but to my surprise, he stops a few feet short, by another door in the hallway.

"This is where I keep my clothes," he explains as I look up at him, surprised. "Meet you up on the deck?"

"Oh, sure." I blink as he opens the door and disappears into what appears to be another cabin, only one with a huge desk and a chair instead of a bed. Is that his office? If so, why does he keep his clothes there?

Well, whatever.

I step into our regular cabin and hurry over to the closet, where I locate dozens of swimsuits. I choose a neon-blue sporty one-piece, both for ease of swimming and because it's less revealing. Not that Alexei hasn't seen all of me already,

but still, I can't help the heat that spreads over my cheeks at the thought that we'll be nearly naked in the ocean together.

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. As far as distractions go, it's a shitty one.

Too late now. I pull on a blue coverup that matches the suit, slip my feet into a pair of white flip-flops, take a deep breath, and step out of the cabin.

ALEXEI IS WAITING FOR ME UNDER THE OVERHANG, WHERE someone has brought two lounge chairs and a little side table with fruity-looking drinks—presumably so we can relax and hydrate in the shade after the swim. To my relief, Alexei's brother is nowhere in sight, but I do see a big bottle of sunblock in Alexei's hands as he rises from his lounge chair.

My breakfast ordeal is about to be repeated.

Sure enough, as soon as I'm in the shade, Alexei orders me to take off my coverup. "You're not stepping out into that sun unprotected," he says, uncapping the bottle as I stop a few feet away, eyeing him warily.

He's changed into a pair of black swimming trunks, and for the moment at least, he's wearing a black T-shirt. It's an outfit that suits him, highlighting as it does the powerful muscles of his legs and the tattooed magnificence of his arms. I swallow hard, remembering what it felt like to be encased in those arms, our naked bodies pressed together as he surged into me, over and over—

"Let me do that," I blurt, feeling my face turn scarlet at the graphic recollection. I already know how this is going to go,

but I have to try.

It's bad enough we're about to be wet and mostly naked together. To also have him rub the sunblock all over me may prove too much for my equilibrium—what little of it I can maintain around him, anyway.

“Take off your coverup,” he repeats, his expression implacable as he starts toward me. “You won't be able to get your back on your own anyway.”

I want to argue that I can at the very least put sunblock on the rest of my body, but he won't be swayed, I can tell. Gritting my teeth, I turn, presenting him with my back, and yank the coverup off over my head. I can feel his scorching gaze tracing over my legs, my ass, the indent of my waist. My swimsuit is far from sexy, but it still reveals far more than it conceals, and though he has already touched me all over, I can't help feeling like a rabbit being presented on a platter to a tiger.

“Alinyonok...” His voice is low and husky as he stops directly behind me, so close I can feel the heat of his powerful body as he places his sunblock-covered hands on my shoulders. “You're so fucking gorgeous.”

My skin ignites all over. I know he wants me. I know he finds me physically attractive, and still, his words make me feel like a teenager after her first kiss. Or maybe it's his touch that has this effect as he begins to work the sunblock under the straps of my swimsuit, his fingers deliciously strong and rough. Then again, maybe I feel this way because *he* gave me my first kiss when I was a teenager—or rather, took it from me.

Whatever the reason, this is infinitely worse than when he covered me with sunblock earlier this morning. At the very

least, I was seated that time. Now, as his hands travel over me, smoothing the cream into my skin, it takes all of my strength to remain upright. My bones seem to have melted, and so has the rest of my body. I'm all trembling breath and heated need, my nipples hard and my core soft and liquid.

If he touches me between my legs, he'll know it. He'll feel how wet I am.

This shouldn't be sexual. All he's doing is making sure I don't burn in the sun. Except everything between us is sexual, and it's his touch that makes me burn. My body decided long ago that this man—this dangerous, violent man—is what it wants, and nothing that's happened since has changed that.

Done with my shoulders, neck, upper chest, arms, and back, he turns me to face him and crouches in front of me, like the last time. My pulse speeds up further. His palms, warm and callused, smooth over the tops of my feet, my ankles, my calves, my knees... I hold my breath as he reaches my thighs and begins rubbing the sunblock into my quads and hamstrings, his touch deceptively platonic. It's only when he looks up at me, his eyes meeting mine, that I see the hunger that simmers in those dark depths—the same hunger that claws at me, making a mockery of my resistance.

Holding my gaze, he moves his hands higher still, rubbing the sunblock into the sides of my hips, the bottoms of my butt cheeks, the exposed area in the front that's only inches away from the part of me that aches and pulses for him. As he reaches the edges of my swimsuit, he smiles, his lips forming a wicked, dangerously seductive curve, and I shudder with the intensity of my desire, with the desperate urge to angle my hips so his fingers press against the narrow strip of neon-blue

fabric shielding my sex. So they touch the bundle of nerves that—

“Now that looks hot and all, but should you two maybe get a cabin?”

Ruslan’s mocking drawl jolts me out of my sensual trance. Stiffening, I step back and, for lack of anything better to do, throw the coverup that I’m still clutching onto one of the lounge chairs. Alexei is already on his feet, glaring at his brother, who’s standing a few feet away and smirking for all he’s worth. Like Alexei, he’s changed out of his formal suit and into a T-shirt and pair of swimming trunks. He must be planning to swim as well.

“I’ll do my face,” I say tightly, reaching for the bottle of sunblock in Alexei’s hands.

He lets me have it this time, and I swiftly pat the cream onto my cheeks, forehead, nose, and chin before carefully rubbing it in. I don’t really care if I mess up my makeup now—I’m about to get my face wet anyway—but old habits die hard.

“Why the fuck are you here? Don’t you have some work to do in your cabin?” Alexei growls, eyeing his brother like he wants to give him a shiner.

Speaking of which, is that a bruise I see on Ruslan’s jaw?

“Nah,” Ruslan says. “Nothing that can’t wait until I’m back home. I overheard you two planning a swim, and it sounded like a great idea to me, so I figured I’d join you.”

My ears perk up. He’s returning to Moscow? How? In a casual, almost disinterested tone, I ask, “And when *are* you going home?”

Alexei's brother grins at me sharply. "Eager to get rid of me? Fear not, I'll leave you to your honeymoon as soon as—"

"Ruslan." Alexei's voice is like the crack of a whip. "Take a dive, will you?"

"Gladly." Ruslan pulls off his shirt with the lazy confidence of a man who's supremely fit and knows it.

As he strolls past me, I see that his body is similarly proportioned to Alexei's and just as muscular, albeit with fewer tattoos. Yet I don't feel any of that discomfiting desire that makes every minute in my new husband's company a special kind of torture. I suppose that makes sense. I've been around plenty of handsome, well-built men, and none of them have lit the slightest bit of spark in me. The rich boys at my boarding school had access to the best personal trainers and dieticians, not to mention plastic surgeons, yet they might as well have been Ken dolls for all the attraction I experienced. Same goes for the guys I met in college. Of course, by then, I knew Alexei was stalking me, so that might've influenced my feelings.

It's hard to be attracted to a man when you know he's likely to end up dead because of it.

I must've been staring at Ruslan while lost in my musings because as soon as he scales the starboard ladder and executes a perfect dive off the top rung, Alexei grips my arm and drags me closer, dipping his head to bring his lips to my ear. His voice is barbed wire wrapped in silk as he whispers, "Like what you see?"

Before I can respond, he spins me to face him. His jaw is clenched tight, a tiny muscle ticking by his ear as he transfers his grip to my nape and leans in, his eyes coal black as he bites

out, “My brother—and every other man—is off limits to you. Do you understand?”

My heartbeat leaps, a chill spreading over my skin at the lethal fury in his gaze. Yet some devil prods me to retort, “Or what? You’ll kill your brother like you killed Josh and that guy in Bali? It was no accident he went over the cliff on his scooter, was it?”

Alexei’s hand tightens on my nape, his fingers biting painfully into my skin as he grips my hip with his other hand. “No.” The word, barely audible, emerges through gritted teeth as he lowers his face until his mouth is barely an inch from mine. “It fucking wasn’t.”

His lips crash against mine, the kiss hard and bruising. It speaks of possession more than desire, of violence rather than lust. Yet a familiar fire streaks through my veins, the smoldering embers of need inside me igniting into flames that scorch everything I am. By the time he lifts his head, I’m clinging to him, weak and breathless, trembling with need. He’s breathing hard as well, his expression still dark, still dangerously possessive.

Shifting his hand to my face, he presses his thumb against my swollen lips. “This is mine.” His voice is a rough, animalistic growl. “And this”—he wedges his other hand between my thighs, palming my sex through my swimsuit with a hard pressure that makes me gasp—“is most definitely mine.”

Before I can respond to that crude statement, he lets me go and steps back. Pulling off his shirt in one swift motion, he drops it onto a lounge chair, strides over to the ladder, and dives overboard with the same effortless athleticism as his brother.

Shaken, I stare after him, my mind able to form only one coherent thought.

My husband is a terrifying man.

CHAPTER 9

ALEXEI

Nearly ten minutes pass before Alina climbs down the starboard ladder into the waves below. I turn onto my back and float, watching her, the dark hunger still burning inside me. I deeply regret our latest bargain, the promise I made not to fuck her today. By now, I should know better than to give in to her pleas, yet here we are again. At the very least, I should've spent a few hours in the cabin with her, quelling my lust in some other way before coming out here.

“You know she’s your wife now, right?” Ruslan flops onto his back beside me, keeping afloat with lazy strokes of his arms. “No need to stare at her like a starving wolf. You can just have her.”

My fucking brother. I grind my teeth and fight the urge to drown him. He’s lucky the coolness of the water has tempered the white-hot jealousy that surged through me when I saw Alina looking at him admiringly. Not that Ruslan would ever try anything with her—he knows I would kill him for that, brother or not—but still, the mere thought that she might want him, or any man but me...

I clench my teeth harder and do my best to ignore Ruslan as I watch Alina gingerly test the water with her foot. She

looks incredibly graceful as she clings to the ladder, her one-piece swimsuit reminding me of a ballerina's outfit minus the skirt. Of course, no ballerina has ever had this effect on me. Even submerged in the cool waters of the Pacific, I'm semi-hard from looking at her. She's all long legs and sleek curves, her body so fucking perfect it should be illegal. My hands literally itch to stroke her smooth skin, to cup her high, round breasts and feel the silky wetness between her—

Fuck. Why did I make that idiotic dress bargain? Or agree to this swim? I could be in bed with her right now instead of out here with my asshole of a brother. Then again, Ruslan is right—she's now my wife. I can have her anytime I want. What's a couple more hours when I've already waited for a decade?

“Just jump in,” Ruslan calls out as Alina pulls her foot out of the water and descends onto the next rung on the ladder, submerging both feet up to her ankles. “It's not as cold as it seems at first.”

She looks over her shoulder at us. “I know.” She takes a deep breath, pinches her nose shut, and pushes herself off the ladder.

My pulse spikes as the water closes over her head. She can swim, I know, but she had that episode earlier. What if she gets dizzy again or faints or—fuck, I shouldn't have agreed to this swim. I turn and cut through the water with swift strokes. It takes mere seconds to reach her, but by then, she's surfaced and she's laughing, pushing her wet hair off her face with both hands.

Something constricts inside me, as if a hand has reached through my ribcage to squeeze into a fist around my heart. That pure, unvarnished joy on her face... that smile, so

genuine and bright—I've never seen anything like it. No longer merely beautiful, my Alinyonok is incandescent, like an angel glowing from within. It feels wrong to want her in this moment, almost sacrilegious, yet the lust in me only burns hotter. I want her with every twisted fiber of my being, every perverse cell in my body. I want her, and I can't have her.

Not until we're alone, at least.

She must notice the dark frustration on my face because she stops laughing and regards me warily. "Hi."

"Hi yourself." Unable to resist, I grab her arm and pull her to me, ignoring her startled gasp as her body bumps against mine under the water. Before she can push away, I wrap one arm around her slender back and grip her jaw in one hand, holding her face still as I lean in and kiss her deeply, taking advantage of her parted lips.

She tastes like the ocean and herself, like salt and sweetness and pure sex. I want to devour her, to delve so deeply inside her that she'll never be separate from me, but all I can have in this moment is this kiss, so I make the best of it, sweeping my tongue over every silky surface of her mouth, nibbling on her soft, plump lips, inhaling her warm, panting breaths. In the back of my mind, I'm aware that my brother is swimming nearby, saying something undoubtedly sarcastic, but I don't give a fuck.

She's mine. Finally, after all these years, she's all mine.

By the time I force myself to stop, her hands are gripping my shoulders and her legs are wrapped tightly around my waist. Breathing shallowly, she stares at me, her lips swollen and parted, her red lipstick mostly gone and her mascara smeared around her bewitching eyes—and I'm so hard I could come on the spot. The water that was so cool and refreshing on

my skin now feels like it's boiling me alive, and it takes everything I have to carefully disengage from her lest I break my promise and take her here and now, in the open ocean, with my brother next to us and the boat slowly drifting away.

Ruslan is uncharacteristically quiet as I reluctantly let go of Alina and put a couple of feet of water between us. It's not enough to lessen the potent pull toward her, but it'll have to do. There could be sharks in these waters, and though they're unlikely to bother us, I refuse to be more than a meter away from her when there's even the slightest chance of danger.

"I..." She licks her lips, moving her arms at her sides to stay afloat. "I'm going to swim a bit, okay?"

Not waiting for my response, she flips onto her stomach and heads toward the yacht with a determined but inefficient breaststroke. I follow her, staying at her side, and we do a couple of laps around the boat—at the end of which she's visibly out of breath.

"I think I've had enough for now," she says, grabbing hold of the ladder. "Feel free to swim more. I'll see you later."

With that, she hauls herself out of the water in a mouthwatering display of perfect curves and wet, gleaming skin.

Fuck. I'm hard again.

I'm about to climb up after her, but as she disappears from sight, I decide that a few more laps around the boat might be just the thing to cool the fire raging inside me. She's likely headed to the shower, and if I see her there right now, I may break my word and take her.

"You should teach her to swim better."

I turn to see Ruslan floating next to me. "Of course I will."

That's my goal for the next few weeks, in fact. My Alinyonok is an okay swimmer, at best. I already knew that from observing her during a few of her beach vacations, but her lack of skill has never mattered before. Now it does. We might be out at sea for a while, and I need to know that she'll be able to swim to safety if, despite my vigilance, she somehow ends up overboard.

My brother regards me curiously. "You're not worried she'll try to escape?"

"She'll try it regardless."

"Fuck." Ruslan blows out a breath, spraying water droplets around himself. "Lyosha, are you sure—"

"I know what I'm doing." My tone is sharp, cutting. We've had this argument half a dozen times before, and I'm not about to back down when I'm so close to having everything I want.

A look disturbingly close to pity settles on my brother's face. "Do you?"

"I do," I say tightly, and not waiting for his reply, I swim away with long, furious strokes.

CHAPTER 10

ALINA

My heart is still racing as I step out of the shower—not because of the exertion of the swim but because I can't stop thinking about Alexei and my stupid, illogical reactions to him. Even worse, I'm beginning to suspect that the bargain we made this morning isn't the same in his mind as it is in mine. I was hoping he wouldn't touch me at all, but his actual words were that he wouldn't fuck me, and given the way he's been acting after the wedding, today is definitely not a no-touch day.

Trying to calm myself, I blow-dry my hair, reapply my makeup—after first putting on a thick layer of sunblock to avoid another ordeal at Alexei's hands—and get dressed. I wish I had something to busy my mind, like a good video game, but I haven't seen anything along those lines in the cabin. Still, I'm reluctant to head up to the deck again and face Alexei and his brother. Both men discomfit me, albeit for different reasons.

I walk over to the bed and sit down, thinking about what Ruslan started saying before Alexei interrupted him—something about leaving us to our “honeymoon.” The implication was that Alexei's brother will depart soon. Does that mean we're going to dock somewhere and drop him off? Or is there a chopper coming for him?

Either way, that means we'll be close to land, which is probably where Alexei intends to get the doctor.

I squash the tiny bloom of hope as soon as it unfurls in my chest. Alexei wouldn't be so foolish as to give me an opportunity to escape so quickly, not after everything he went through to bring me here. But still... what if—

The cabin door opens and Alexei steps in, his swimming trunks dripping wet and his powerful muscles flexing underneath his tattooed, water-dappled skin. He must've just finished his swim and come straight here—something I didn't expect for some reason.

I swallow and cross my legs as casually as I can, trying to project the image of a cool, unaffected ice princess. It's not easy. Alexei half-naked is a sight to behold, but Alexei half-naked and wet is the stuff my most fucked-up erotic dreams are made of. My breath speeds up as my inner muscles tighten, reminding me that I'm sore and that the salt water did *not* make it better.

“You're showering here?” I ask, somehow achieving a semi-normal tone.

He arches a dark, mocking eyebrow. “Why wouldn't I?”

“Don't you have another cabin? The one where your clothes are?”

“That's my office,” he answers, confirming my earlier guess. “And my clothes are only there temporarily. My personal shopper didn't understand the space constraints here, so she overdid it with your clothes, leaving no room for mine in this closet. I've already asked Vika to fix this situation by transferring some of your clothes to the other cabin and some

of mine here.” He crosses the floor and stops next to the bed. Looking down at me, he states, “You’ll assist her.”

I glare up at him and push up to my feet—a mistake, as it puts us so close together his body nearly touches mine. And I still have to crane my neck to meet his gaze. Regardless, I refuse to be intimidated. “Why would I?”

I certainly don’t want his stuff here.

“Because otherwise, you’ll end up with clothes you dislike in the most convenient closet and vice versa,” he replies with maddening logic.

“As if I care. I dislike *all* these clothes.”

I actually haven’t had a chance to look at most of them, and what I’ve seen so far is exactly to my taste, but I’m not about to tell him that.

“In that case, *I’ll* assist Vika.” His lips stretch into a mocking semblance of a smile, and he lifts his hand to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear before trailing his knuckles down my jaw. “You know, I think there are certain clothes I’d prefer to see you in all the time... like bikini swimsuits and lingerie. Or maybe nothing at all.”

I swat his hand away before it can brush my collarbone. “Then why did you get me a closet full of designer outfits?”

“Because I wanted you to be comfortable and feel at home here. But if you dislike everything anyway...” He shrugs his broad shoulders, causing little droplets of water to fly at me.

I fight the perverse urge to lick the remaining droplets off his chest. Instead, I take a step to the side, putting more distance between us, and say with as much iciness as I can muster, “You’re dripping water everywhere, like a wet dog.”

He doesn't look insulted. His onyx eyes glimmer with amusement, and one corner of his lips curls up in a decidedly wolfish smirk. "Want to come dry me, help me change?"

"Hard pass," I say, and immediately hate myself for how breathy the words come out. With the AC pumping in cool air through the vents, it's almost chilly in the room, but I feel flushed, overly warm—and I know exactly what's to blame.

I haven't had a chance to examine Alexei's tattoos up close before, and I can't help sneaking a look at his inked skin now. The tattoos decorating his chest and arms are nothing short of a work of art, with each image smoothly flowing into the next. A lot of the individual tattoos are dragons, intricately detailed and so realistically drawn that they look like they'll breathe fire at any moment. Each movement of his shoulder muscles makes the wings of one of the dragons flex, as if it's about to take flight and—

"Like what you see?" Alexei asks, dark amusement dripping through each syllable, and I flush hotter.

Forcing my gaze up to his face, I ask, "Why the dragons?"

There's no point in pretending I wasn't staring.

"No particular reason," he answers. "I just liked the way the artist drew them."

That simple? Somehow, I doubt it. "Why so much ink in general?"

In our circles in Moscow, even among my generation, tattoos are still a bit of a taboo—especially prominent, visible ones, like the kind Alexei is sporting. They're too closely associated with prisons and labor camps, and even though the business practices of the richest Russians are often extra-legal,

they don't like to think of themselves as criminals. I know my father didn't.

Alexei's white teeth flash in a sharp, dangerous grin. "Why do you think, my beauty? I needed something to take my mind off the fact that I couldn't have you."

My breath catches and my flush intensifies, the heat spreading to my neck and chest. I want to turn away, to hide from the scorching intensity in his stare, but my feet are rooted to the ground, any attempt at a reply stuck in my throat. When I finally manage to speak, my voice is strained. "You could've had someone else."

"Yes, I could have." He steps up to me and clasps my hands in each of his, holding them tightly at his sides as he says in a low, rough voice, "I didn't want anyone else, Alinyonok. I've never wanted anyone the way that I want you. And it's not just about sex for me. I want to hold you, take care of you, keep you safe..." His eyes glow with dark fervor. "I want to make you happy."

A hot, stinging pressure gathers behind my lids, and a peculiar lump takes residence in my throat. To my shock, I recognize that I'm on the verge of crying—and not from fear or anger. Alexei's decade-long obsession with me is terrifying, entirely unwelcome, but it's also... oh, fuck. I blink rapidly to stop the moisture pooling in my eyes from spilling out, but it happens anyway, the fat tears gathering at the corners of my eyes and rolling down my cheeks, messing up my makeup anew.

Worse yet, I'm looking at him as it happens, and he sees it—how his admission affects me, the way his words pull on my emotions against all logic, all common sense. I hate him, I really do, yet there's a tiny, needy part of me that can't help

but want what he's offering, that's tempted to take the bait despite knowing what awaits me if I do.

“Alinyonok...” His voice softens, gentles, even as a fierce, dangerous flame burns in his eyes. Slowly, as if afraid to spook me, he brings his head down until his lips hover by my ear, his breath warm on my skin as he whispers, “Give us a chance. It will work out, I promise.”

And before I can turn away, he presses his lips to the wet streak on my cheek, kissing away the tears, pulling on the strings he's hooked to me like the puppet master that he is.

CHAPTER 11

ALEXEI

Something has changed. Something has shifted between us. I can feel it.

She doesn't turn her cheek away from my lips. Doesn't stiffen or try to move away as I use my grip on her hands to pull her closer until her dress is pressed against my wet skin and her flat belly cradles my stiff erection. I can taste the salt of her tears, and it makes me so fucking hard I all but shake with the need to push her onto the bed, to tear off her flimsy, pretty underwear and plunge deep inside her soft, wet heat.

Except I promised. I fucking promised.

So I call on every self-control technique I've mastered over the years and trail my lips down to her jaw, mopping up those exquisite tears. She closes her eyes, and I feel her tremble as I near her mouth, those plush red lips that have been driving me insane for a decade. Only I don't kiss her there. My goal is her other cheek, more of that delicious, salty wetness that tells me I'm getting through to her, that she's finally hearing what I'm saying.

Her lashes flutter as I brush my lips over her closed lids, and something moves inside me, an odd, powerful feeling that both competes with and adds to the lust burning in my veins,

the hunger for her that knows no bounds. I've told her the truth: I want to make her happy, to give her everything she's ever wanted. But I also want to take her. To consume her. To crush her resistance until she admits she's mine—that she'll *always* be fucking mine.

Shuddering from the force of my need, I move my hands to her face, cradling her cheeks between my palms, and as her lids lift, revealing her jade-green eyes, I slant my lips over hers, drinking her in, reveling in her taste, her feel, her lush sensuality. She's never been able to deny me her physical response—and she doesn't now. As I sweep my tongue over her lips, she parts them, letting me into the soft, hot recesses of her mouth. Her tongue tangles with mine, softly at first, a butterfly's tender caress, then more decisively, with open hunger. I groan, deepening the kiss, and she presses her body against mine, her hands clutching at my sides.

In this, at least, we are aligned.

She wants me. She can't fight it.

Except she *is* fighting, I realize with a jolt. She's wedged her hands between us and is trying to push me away, her sharp little teeth digging into my lower lip. The tiny spike of pain is shocking, like suddenly being clawed by a cuddly kitten. I jerk back, staring at her incredulously, and she pushes harder, freeing herself and stumbling back.

“You promised!” Tears glitter like raindrops on her long lashes as she stares up at me, her red lips trembling as she backs away. “Alexei, you fucking promised...”

Anger spikes through me, overlaid with the bitter sting of betrayal. It's illogical, I know, but mere moments ago, it felt like we were on the same page, finally moving past all the unnecessary obstacles she's erected in her mind. And here we

are again, with her holding me to a promise I never should've made. A promise I had no intention of breaking.

“I said I won't fuck you. I didn't promise not to do anything else.” My words are hard and clipped, my tone ice even as fire roars inside me, a mix of lust and fury that leaves no room for reason and patience.

For eleven years, I've waited, consumed with thoughts of her, with fantasies of what it'll be like once she's finally mine—and she's still playing games, still refusing to admit the truth.

She lifts her chin, all bravery now that there are a few steps between us. “Semantics—how lovely.” Derision creeps into her tone. “I guess deals with the devil require precise wording.”

I bare my teeth in a humorless grin. “Oh, they do.”

We regard each other tensely, volatile emotions pulsing in the air between us. The distance separating us is more than physical. I can feel her walls rising, her defenses snapping back into place. Where moments ago was only tenderness, there's now anger. On her part and on mine. Coming so close to what I want—her giving in and admitting her feelings—has only highlighted how far away my ultimate goal still is. I guess some naïve part of me has been convinced that if we ever got a chance to interact for any real length of time, she'd see what has been obvious to me all along: how perfect we are for each other. But that's not how it's turning out to be. Not even close.

Even though I'm her husband, she still views me as her enemy, still plans to resist me with everything she has—and I'm running out of patience.

That last bit must be reflected on my face because she blanches, taking another step back—and something inside me snaps.

“Fuck this,” I growl, and reaching her in three long strides, I sweep her into my arms.

CHAPTER 12

ALEXEI

Once upon a time, I didn't know that lust could hurt, that desire could be pain. For my fourteenth birthday, my father paid a high-end escort to initiate me, and for the next few years, sex became a near-daily indulgence. I liked my women older, experienced, and highly skilled in bed. Models, actresses, socialites—they all gravitated toward the Leonov power and wealth. I could fuck a different woman every night, and often did. Girls my age bored me, so I didn't bother dating. Why would I, when I could have sex without any effort or commitment? When the mere mention of my last name was enough for a fuck anytime anywhere?

My teenage self couldn't have imagined that soon, I'd want one woman and one woman only. Or more precisely, a too-young girl—and later, a fragile, traumatized young woman—that I couldn't allow myself to have.

Until now.

She bucks in my arms as I carry her to our bed, but I ignore her struggles. Bending my head, I capture her lips with mine. She tries to turn her head to the side, to push me away by pressing her palms against my shoulders, but I don't allow it.

Enough is enough. I'm done letting her play these games.

Her lips part under the pressure of my hungry kisses, her hands instinctively gripping my shoulders as I sweep my tongue deep into her mouth, stoking the flames that I know burn in her. And in me.

Fuck, do I burn for her.

My cock is painfully hard inside my trunks, the wet material annoyingly restrictive. Growling in frustration, I lay her down on the bed and straighten to undress.

She scrambles back, panting, her jade eyes wide. "Alexei, please..." Her voice shakes. "Please don't—" She chokes on the words as I push down my trunks and kick them away.

I suck in a breath as cool air washes over my engorged cock, providing a modicum of relief from the violent need pulsing inside me. All I want is to yank open her legs and bury myself in her slick heat, but that's not what we're doing today.

Grabbing her ankles, I drag her toward me, ignoring her ineffectual struggles. Keeping my grip on one ankle, I avoid a kick from her other foot as I flip up the skirt of her dress, baring her lower body to my gaze. Her underwear is a scrap of black lace that's no match for my impatient fingers. A quick tug, and it joins my swimming trunks on the floor as I drink in the sight of her soft pink folds, already glistening with the telltale sign of arousal—even as she keeps trying to kick at me, still pretending that she doesn't want this.

"Stay still," I growl, gripping her knees to keep her in place as I kneel on the bed. "If you don't, I'll break my fucking promise."

I don't really know what I'm saying, but it must be effective because she stops struggling and freezes in place,

breathing shallowly as I hook my hands under her knees and drape her legs over my shoulders, lifting her entire lower body off the bed. Then, with her pussy conveniently near my face, I begin to feast.

She cries out, her eyes scrunching shut as I drag my tongue through her folds, lapping up every drop of moisture I find. Her taste—sweet, subtly musky, and all woman—drives me wild. I eat her like a man possessed, like the starving animal I am. For years, I’ve dreamed of this, of her taste on my lips, her scent in my nostrils, her moans of pleasure in my ears, and finally, we’re here. I want to consume her, devour her, own her in every way possible. I want to command her pleasure and her pain, so I can occupy her every thought the way she occupies mine.

She bucks in my grasp, her cries growing louder, incoherent pleas mixing with ragged moans as I suck vigorously on her clit, causing more delicious wetness to spurt onto my tongue. She’s close, I can feel it, so I slow down, keeping her on the edge until she’s shaking and panting, my name a gasping prayer on her lips.

“Alexei, please, Alexei... oh, God!”

Dark satisfaction courses through me, even as my own body shudders with unfulfilled need. In this moment, I *am* her god. I am her everything, and she can’t deny it. Can’t push me away and claim to hate me when her legs are wrapped so tightly around my neck I can hardly breathe. Can’t fight me when she’s writhing against me, desperate for the relief only I can provide.

I’m tempted to torture her longer, to make her pay for all the torment she’s put me through, but my own hunger is too powerful to resist. With a few hard, rhythmic sucks, I send her

over the edge, and as she gasps and shudders all over, I lick her through the aftershocks and lower her back onto the bed.

She opens her eyes, her pupils still unfocused as I yank her dress off over her head and toss it aside. She's not wearing a bra, I realize in a distant corner of my mind as I take in her pale round breasts and hard pink nipples—a mouthwatering sight that makes me impossibly harder. The desire pounding through me is raw and savage, violent in its intensity, and it takes everything I have to grip her shoulders gently and maneuver her onto her hands and knees, facing me. She blinks up at me, confused, and I wind my hand in her hair, tilting her head back. She gets it then. Her eyes go wide as I guide my swollen cock toward her parted lips and, before she can resist, push the tip inside.

At the feel of her hot, wet mouth, the remnants of my self-control disintegrate, and I thrust my hips forward, shoving half of my length into her mouth. She chokes and sputters, so I pull back to let her breathe, and then I thrust again, deeper, until I feel the back of her throat. She struggles, her eyes watering as she pushes at my hipbone with one hand, but I can no longer restrain myself, can no longer hold back as I begin to fuck her face in earnest. For a decade, those glossy red lips have taunted me, promising all sorts of sinful pleasures—and they more than fulfill that promise. My beauty is not skilled at giving head, far from it, but this is the hottest blowjob I've ever received, her very innocence an aphrodisiac.

I'm the only man who knows what she looks like as she gags and chokes on my cock, and every atavistic part of me revels in that fact.

Holding her hair in a tight grip, I fuck her mouth the way I'm dying to fuck her pussy—hard and fast, without holding

back. I know I should be gentler, should initiate her slowly, but something dark and primal has broken free in me and refuses to go back into its cage. Ruthlessly, I use her mouth, all the while telling her what a good girl she is, how much I love fucking her throat, how good her soft, plump lips feel wrapped around my cock... how gorgeous she looks with her makeup smeared by tears and saliva.

She chokes again, her throat convulsing around my cock as I thrust in all the way, and her eyes turn wild and panicked as she claws at my side, desperate for air.

“It’s okay, you can do it,” I whisper hoarsely, hardly knowing what I’m saying as the approaching orgasm, hot and electric, draws my balls tight and covers my spine with gooseflesh. “That’s it, my sweet girl... Oh, fuck!”

I come so violently my vision flashes red and black, scorching ecstasy crashing through each cell in my body as jets of cum erupt from my cock and pour deep into her throat. The agonizing pleasure goes on and on, and when I’m finally spent, I reluctantly withdraw from her throat and let her collapse onto the bed, gasping for air.

She’s still shaking and breathing in erratic gasps as I lie down beside her and gather her into my arms, pressing her face against my chest. I was too rough, I know, and a part of me is horrified by what I’ve done. But another, bigger part revels in the way she clings to me now, needing comfort... needing *me* even though I’m the cause of her distress.

Maybe she was right yesterday, when I told her I didn’t want to hurt her and she called me a liar. I don’t want to hurt her—I never have—but I can’t deny that there’s a part of me that’s willing to destroy her resistance by any means necessary.

That will stop at nothing to make her mine.

Drawing her deeper into my embrace, I stroke her back until her breathing evens out and her body softens against mine... until the newly discovered monster inside me is quiescent once more, content to hold her and wait until he can emerge again.

CHAPTER 13

ALINA

I must've drifted off in Alexei's embrace because when I blink open my eyes and turn my head, the sun is entering the cabin at an entirely different angle. I swallow, feeling the rawness of my abused throat and tasting the musky aftertaste of cum. Gingerly, I pull back and glance up at Alexei's face. His eyes are closed, his lips slightly parted as his powerful chest moves up and down with even breaths.

He's asleep.

My husband is asleep.

My stomach flips over at the thought, and a scorching flush races up my cheeks at the realization that we're both naked, our legs tangled together, my skin all but glued to his. Worse yet, I recall in vivid detail exactly what went down before we fell asleep—the way he gave me incandescent pleasure, only to then ruthlessly take his own, treating me like a sex doll in the process. And I... didn't completely hate it.

No, what am I thinking? Of course, I hated it. I hated every minute of that forced blowjob, except maybe the aftermath, when he held me close and I felt all light and floaty, as if I were high. And it's possible I didn't exactly hate it when he stared down at me with those demon-dark eyes and praised me, his deep, velvety voice gliding over my ears like a caress

and making the violation of my mouth if not exactly pleasurable, then at least tolerable.

Fuck. I guess I didn't completely hate it.

I close my eyes and take a deep, slow breath, then peek up at my husband through my eyelashes. In sleep, most men look relaxed and a bit boyish, but not Alexei. His features remain angular and hard, the line of his jaw as cruelly hewn as ever. Even the dark half-moons of his thick lashes don't soften his appearance; if anything, they emphasize the sharp edges of his cheekbones.

He looks feral and dangerous... as dangerous as he is.

I contemplate carefully wriggling out of his embrace and slinking away, hiding somewhere for the next few hours. But where? The yacht is not that big. As soon as he wakes up, he'll find me—assuming I manage to extricate myself without waking him.

Before I can make a decision one way or another, the rhythm of his breath alters, his lashes rising to reveal the dark, hypnotic pools of his eyes—eyes that don't look the least bit sleepy or unfocused. Was he not actually asleep? Or does he always go from sleep to wakefulness in a split second, like some kind of futuristic robot?

Whatever it is, he's wide awake and staring right at me, rendering all thoughts of running and hiding moot.

I swallow again, tasting him deep in my throat, and the burning flush spreads to my neck and chest as a darkly sensual curve appears on his lips.

“Did you have a nice nap, my beauty?” he asks in a sleep-roughened voice, lifting a hand to brush back my hair—which

undoubtedly resembles a rat's nest, I realize with embarrassment.

In general, I'm far from a beauty right now, with my makeup half-gone and my breath smelling like cum.

"Excuse me," I say in a strained voice, wedging my hands between our bodies to push at his shoulders. "I need the bathroom."

"In a moment," he says, eyes gleaming, and before I can react, he fists his hand in my hair and kisses me. Hungrily, deeply, as if he hasn't slaked his lust in years instead of mere hours.

As if I were the sexiest woman alive instead of the hot mess that I am.

Helplessly, I give in to the kiss, my embarrassment no match for the arousal thrumming through my core. I forget all about needing to brush my teeth and wash my face, about the marriage I don't want and the husband who's forced me into it. All I want is more, and when he finally pulls away, I blink at him, stupidly disappointed.

"Go," he says, releasing me to sit up and swing his feet off the bed. His voice is hoarser than before as he scrubs his hand over his face, not looking at me. "You still need the bathroom, right?"

Oh, right. Fighting another blush, I jump off the bed, grab a robe, and throw it on as I beeline for the destination I claimed to need. And boy, do I need it, I realize as I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror. The fact that he wanted to kiss me while I look like this is beyond belief. With dark trails of mascara on my cheeks, my lipstick smeared, and my hair

matted in a few places, I look like a sex worker after a rough night. Which, in a way, is what I am.

Alexei paid a price—in blood and lives—for sex with me. Because that’s what this marriage is, ultimately: he gets my body, however and whenever he wants. And I can’t even put up a decent fight.

Disgusted, I look away from the mirror and grab a toothbrush. Why can’t I be stronger when it comes to him? Would he still want me if he had to force me into his bed each time? If the touch of his blood-stained hands left me cold and dry, as by all rights it should?

Furiously, I scrub my teeth and spit out the toothpaste. I hate myself. I really do. Why do I even care what I look like around him? If anything, I should be doing my best to repel him, to make it so he can’t bear to touch me—since I can’t seem to resist his touch. This compulsion to primp and make myself more desirable makes no sense in light of my situation, yet I can’t stop my hands from reaching for the hairbrush and the drawers full of my preferred brands of makeup.

Without them, I feel naked. More naked than when I am simply without clothes.

A few minutes later, my face and hair are back to normal, and I feel a smidge better. More in control, even though that bit is an illusion. I have no control in this situation, no say over anything that’s happening to me. Alexei makes all the decisions here, no matter how many bargains I try to make.

A rapping on the bathroom door jerks me out of my thoughts.

“Alinyonok?”

My heartbeat leaps at his pet name for me, uttered in his deep, rough voice. “Yeah?” I call out, wrapping the belt of the robe tighter around myself.

“Dinner is ready,” he announces. “Get dressed, and I’ll meet you up on the deck.”

Dinner? How long have I been asleep? I haven’t spotted a clock anywhere, so I have no idea what time it is. In general, I have no idea how long it’s been since he took me away from my family. Two days? More? By now, my brothers must be going crazy, deploying all the resources at their disposal to track us down.

A low, pulsing ache forms at the back of my skull, a vise-like pressure tightening my temples. I wince, dread filling my stomach. It’s the beginning of a migraine, one of my bad ones, not the tension headache that threatened to show up this morning before breakfast. I recognize its insidious start, and I can’t help wondering why I’m getting it now as opposed to yesterday or before the wedding, when I was, by any measure, more anxious about my fate. Not that I’m not anxious now; if anything, what happened after the swim has shown me that pregnancy isn’t the only thing to fear in Alexei’s bed—a place where I will undoubtedly end up after this dinner.

“Alina?” His voice takes on a different tone. “Are you all right?”

He sounds concerned. Somehow, he knows something is off.

“Alina?” The door handle rattles violently. “Answer me.”

I snap out of whatever paralysis was holding me in place and step up to the door to unlock it before he decides to break it down. “I’m fine,” I say, yanking the door open. A swell of

nausea belies my words as the pain in my skull intensifies with the sharp motion.

He grips my arms, his dark eyes drilling into me. “You’re pale.”

He can tell that with all the makeup? I must not have done as good of a job as I thought. “I’m...” I swallow against another bout of nausea. “I’m getting one of my headaches, that’s all.”

He swears, the words low and harsh. “Then you need to lie down.”

Before I can protest that I don’t want to go back to bed, he picks me up again and carries me there. He lays me down onto the blanket as carefully as if my bones were made of matches, and then he strides over to the door and exits into the hallway.

It’s only after he’s gone that I realize he left the cabin fully naked.

CHAPTER 14

ALEXEI

“What the fuck?” Ruslan exclaims as I burst into my office and yank open the top drawer of my desk, behind which he’s sitting with his laptop. “Did you forget something... like pants?”

“I need Alina’s medicine,” I say tersely as I grab the pills and a bottle of water. “And for Vika to do her needle voodoo. Tell her to bring whatever she needs to our cabin.” As I speak, I head for the closet, where I grab the first pair of jeans I find—if only to shut my brother up.

Ruslan’s tone turns serious. “Alina’s got one of her headaches?”

“Yes.” She wasn’t faking either. Her face had that pale, slightly greenish hue that I remember from her eighteenth birthday party.

“Fuck.” Ruslan pushes to his feet. “That sucks. I was hoping—”

“Me too.”

I exit the office and head back to the bedroom cabin where I left Alina. Over the years, I’ve consulted numerous doctors about her condition, but there was only so much they could tell me without seeing the actual patient and running a bunch of

tests—even though I sent them every medical record of hers I could access. Those records were surprisingly sparse. She only saw a couple of different doctors about her migraines early on, and that was mostly to get the painkillers that all but knock her out.

It's like she doesn't care about getting better.

But I care. I want her healthy and well, and I'll do whatever it takes to accomplish that. The bottle of pills in my hand is the strongest migraine medicine on the market, given to me by the top neurologist in Moscow. When we get home, I'll take her to him for a thorough evaluation, but in the meantime, this should stave off the worst of the pain. I don't think she's tried this medicine before—at least it was never officially prescribed to her, according to her records. And, of course, there's always Vika.

Speaking of whom, I hear the quick patter of my chef's feet and turn to see her hurrying down the hallway toward me, a big black briefcase-style bag in her hands.

“You ready?” I ask, and she nods, her dark eyes serious.

“Okay. Let's go in.”

I open the door to the cabin and walk in with Vika on my heels. Alina is on the bed, dressed in one of her sleep peignoirs and with a wet towel over her forehead. I curse myself for not providing her with the latter before I left. It's a mistake I won't make again.

I cross the room and set the pills and the bottle of water on the nightstand before perching on the edge of the bed next to my wife. “Already that bad?” I ask softly, keeping my voice low and soothing. I know from personal experience that noises

and headaches don't mix—though mine have never been as debilitating as hers.

Alina gives a small, jerky nod, her lips pressed into a tight line, and I snap my fingers at Vika, who's walking around the cabin and pulling down the window shades to block out the remaining rays of the early evening sun. She hurries over as I shake out two pills onto my palm.

“Swallow these,” I tell Alina as I remove the towel and loop my arm around her slender back to gently lift her to a half-sitting position.

She blinks up at me owlishly. “What are they?”

“Migraine meds. Open up.”

She hesitates, but then she must decide to trust me. Obediently, she opens her mouth, and I place the pills onto her tongue before handing her the bottle of water. Once she's swallowed them, I lower her back onto her pillow and turn around to look at Vika, who's already got her bag open and her needles spread out at the foot of the bed.

“What is that?” Alina asks warily, pushing up onto her elbow to follow my gaze.

“Vika was a doctor of acupuncture in her former life,” I say. “She thinks she can help your migraines.”

“I trained with the best practitioners in China,” Vika says softly, coming to stand next to me with a few needles in hand. “If you will allow me...”

Alina glances at me uncertainly. “I guess...”

“Let her try,” I say. “It won't hurt.”

I'm not a believer in meridians, chi, and all that crap, but Vika's needles have done wonders for my tension headaches

and some of my men's old injuries. I'll never know how much of that is the placebo effect, but the way I see it, if it works, it works.

“Lie back and relax,” Vika urges. “You won't even feel it, I promise.”

Alina looks skeptical but obeys, and Vika goes to work. Within minutes, my wife looks like a pincushion—a gorgeous one, but still a pincushion. My chest tightens as I watch her grimace from what must be a particularly strong stab of pain in her head, and I clasp her hand in mine, stroking the inside of her wrist with my thumb to distract her. I wish I could do more. I wish I were the one lying there hurting instead of her. If only—

“There,” Vika murmurs, stepping back. “Now give it a few minutes. Don't move, okay?”

“Okay,” Alina mumbles, closing her eyes, and I feel a slight easing of the tension in her hand as I continue stroking her wrist. “Just come back to remove them soon, please.”

“Yes, of course.”

With a few quick steps, Vika is gone, carefully closing the door behind her.

CHAPTER 15

ALINA

It happens slowly, gradually, and then seemingly all at once. The nausea disappears, and the violent drumming in my skull eases, the stabbing pain fading to a low throb of tension in my temples. And the entire time, I feel his touch: his hand, so big and warm, the rough, callused edge of his thumb rubbing circles over my wrist, soothing and relaxing me, somehow pulling the pain away.

Is it the medication? The hair-thin needles that have transformed me into a porcupine? Or maybe it's simply the hypnotic way he's rubbing my wrist, warming me deep within, dissolving the anxious knot in my stomach—a knot that formed when I started thinking about my brothers tracking us down, I realize with a start.

“Feeling any better?” Alexei asks softly, and I open my eyes, grateful for the interruption. I don't want to think about what it means that the thought of being rescued triggered this migraine, when in the past, the trigger has always been the fear of belonging to him.

“Yes, much better,” I admit. “How long has it been?”

He smiles, and for once, the cynical curve of his lips holds nothing but warm pleasure. “About ten minutes. Too soon for

the medication to have worked, so Vika's skills must be on point. Literally."

Or your touch is magic.

But I don't say it. I can't. Instead, I chuckle weakly at his pun and close my eyes, hoping he continues doing that wrist-rubbing thing—and he does. Before long, the low throb of the remaining headache quiets too, and I begin to feel sleepy.

"Forgot to mention... The pills may make you drowsy," Alexei murmurs, moving his thumb down to massage my palm, and I sigh contentedly as I feel the needles being removed from my head.

Is Vika back? I didn't even hear her come in. Maybe she picked up some ninja skills in China, along with the acupuncture. No, wait, that's Japan...

I WAKE UP TO THE FEEL OF WARM LIPS BRUSHING OVER MY eyelids.

Is this a dream? I want it to be a dream...

"Breakfast time, sleepyhead," Alexei's deep voice murmurs in my ears, and a bristly cheek rubs against my jaw as a soft, gentle kiss is placed on my temple.

Not a dream then. At least not any kind of dream I've had before. Usually, the dreams that involve Alexei are much darker... and infinitely more erotic. Reluctantly, I open my eyes and see my husband bending over me, a tender smile on his lips.

I blink, waiting for the curve of his mouth to take on its familiar cruel, sardonic edge, but the tenderness is still there,

as is the warmth in his onyx eyes.

Unable to bear it, I look away and clear my throat. “Breakfast, you said?”

“Hmm-mm.” He presses another soft, sweet kiss to my forehead, making my heart beat erratically. “You’ve slept for about fourteen hours and skipped dinner, so I wanted to make sure you get some food in before we have a repeat of yesterday.” He cups my jaw, forcing my eyes to meet his. “How are you feeling? Any lingering headache, nausea, dizziness?”

“I... no.” I’m stunned that I’ve slept that long, but otherwise, I’m feeling perfectly fine. Maybe a bit hungry, even.

As if in response to that thought, my stomach lets out a loud growl.

Make that *very* hungry—and very embarrassed, especially once I see the grin on Alexei’s face.

I sit up, doing my best to ignore the flush that’s undoubtedly reddening my face. “Breakfast sounds good. Just let me get ready.”

“Okay.” He’s still smiling, his dark eyes crinkling at the corners. “I’ll see you up there in a few.”

Dropping another kiss on my forehead, he exits the room.

I RUSH THROUGH MY MORNING ROUTINE WITH RECORD SPEED—because I’m hungry, not because I’m eager to see Alexei in any way, shape, or form. As I blow-dry my hair, I again wonder why I’m bothering to look good for a man I don’t

want to attract, but my hands operate on autopilot, applying lipstick and mascara, putting on a lacy bra-and-thong set, pulling out a sky-blue silk dress and a pair of flesh-toned high-heeled sandals from the closet.

When I emerge onto the deck, Alexei is standing by the railing on the starboard side, talking to Ruslan. Hearing my footsteps, Alexei turns to face me, and even though I saw him less than a half hour ago, my mouth goes dry as the impact of his presence slams into me.

He's back to his usual dark clothes this morning—another black T-shirt and a pair of dark-washed jeans. With the breeze ruffling his black hair and the sun highlighting the intricate designs of the tattoos decorating his powerful arms, he looks like a modern-day pirate, a savage warlord of the seas.

I'm so focused on him that I'm only peripherally aware of his brother as the two of them come toward me. My heart thunders in my ribcage, and my face feels like it's burning despite the thick layer of sunblock I applied underneath my makeup. For no reason at all, my mind flashes to what he did to me in bed yesterday—and to the fact that today, there's no bargain of any kind to keep him from taking what he wants.

From doing anything he wants with me.

I swallow hard and do my best to look composed as he stops in front of me, Ruslan at his side.

“You look beautiful, Alinyonok,” my husband says softly, his eyes gleaming, and though I've heard a version of this compliment a million times before from all sorts of people, a peculiar warmth invades my chest—the same sensation I experienced this morning in his presence.

It's a warmth that's both entwined with and separate from the heated tension that fills my core as he leans in and brushes a proprietary kiss over my lips.

"I take it you're feeling better," Ruslan says dryly when Alexei straightens, and I blink, finally fully registering his presence.

"Yes, much better," I say, managing a cool smile in his direction. "Thanks."

He flashes back a sharp, white grin. "Relieved to hear that. Now can we eat, please? I'm starving."

Without waiting for a reply, he heads over to the table under the overhang, and Alexei and I follow. As we walk, Alexei places his palm on the small of my back, sending a warm tingle down my spine that I do my best to ignore.

As soon as we're seated, Vika appears with a cart laden with all manner of dishes. I go for my usual buckwheat kasha with fruit, while the men pile their plates high with lobster omelet, shrimp, and grilled vegetables. I wrinkle my nose, watching them. Such rich, savory food so early—despite my hunger, the mere thought of it turns my stomach.

"What's the matter?" Alexei asks, his dark eyes instantly homing in on me. It's like he has a sixth sense where I'm concerned.

"Nothing," I say, putting down my spoon. "Just feeling a tiny bit nauseated, that's all. Probably the side effect of yesterday's meds."

"Could be," Alexei says. "Next time, we'll try Vika's needles first. Or better yet, Vika can work with you prophylactically, try to prevent the headaches altogether."

He resumes eating, and so do I, trying my best not to breathe in the pungent aroma of the eggs and the seafood. It's making my mouth water, and not in a good way.

“So, how is Slava?” Ruslan asks, and I look up at him, blinking in confusion until I remember that he is also the child's uncle, same as Alexei.

It's still strange to me that Alexei and I are equally related to Nikolai's son—and so is Ruslan.

“He's good,” I say cautiously, reaching for a glass of orange juice. I can't imagine Ruslan is happy with my family for abducting his nephew—even though Nikolai, as Slava's father, had every right to do so. “He's growing. Learning English.”

“Alexei said he's gotten really attached to your brother and his new wife,” Ruslan says. “Did he ever talk about us? Does he miss us?”

I glance at Alexei, who's watching me intently. He must want to know the answer to that as well.

“He... didn't talk much for a while,” I admit. “I think between his mother's death and getting to know us, it was a lot to process for a child that young.” I bite my lip, looking from brother to brother. “Were you two close to him?”

“Not as close as we would've liked,” Alexei says. “After Ksenia got pregnant, she moved to Krasnodar to live with our mother's sister. We barely saw her and Slava except on major holidays.” His lips press together. “Now I'm realizing that was probably because she was afraid that if we spent more time with her son, we'd figure out who Slava's father was.”

“You didn't suspect my family at all?” I ask, and Ruslan shakes his head.

“In hindsight, Slava’s resemblance to your brothers should’ve clued us in to his paternity, but neither of us was even thinking in that direction,” he says with a grimace. “As far as we knew, Ksenia had never met any Molotovs. When she fell pregnant, she said it was from a one-night stand, and she didn’t want us to pursue it as she had no interest in being with the guy—so we let it be.”

“A mistake, as I told you,” Alexei says grimly. “If we’d pressed harder, or at least run a DNA test—”

“We respected our sister’s wishes,” Ruslan snaps. “As a family should.”

The two men glare at each other. Apparently, I’ve inadvertently stirred up an old argument. I should probably back away, change the topic, but something reckless propels me forward.

“What about your father?” I ask. “Did he get on well with Slava?”

I’m looking at Alexei as I ask the question, so I see it when his whole body stiffens, his face emptying of any and all expression.

“He hardly knew the boy,” Ruslan says flatly, and when I shift my gaze to him, he’s wearing the same telling lack of expression as his brother. “At least they didn’t spend much time together before Ksenia died.”

I take a sip of my orange juice to buy myself a moment to process all this. There’s so much I don’t know about my husband and his family, and what I do know isn’t good. I’ve grown up with ruthless men, but Boris Leonov, Alexei and Ruslan’s father, is rumored to be in a class of his own. I’ve heard whispers of everything from assassinations of entire

families to gruesome torture of his enemies—and if that’s being openly whispered about in our circles, it’s barely the tip of the iceberg.

I can’t imagine a man like that being kind to a child... and the way Slava acted around Nikolai at first, all closed off and afraid, raised all sorts of suspicions for us.

“Why did Slava go live with your father then?” I ask, and though I try my best to keep my voice level, the question comes out like an accusation. “Was there no one else who could’ve taken him in after Ksenia’s accident?”

Like, say, one of his uncles—not that there’s any guarantee that *they* would’ve been kind to the child. Slava didn’t act like he was afraid of his “Uncle Lyosha” during the armed standoff between Alexei and my brother, but I can hardly draw conclusions about their relationship from that brief interaction.

If I weren’t paying such close attention, I might’ve missed it—a flicker of something so cold and dark behind Alexei’s expressionless façade that my blood chills in my veins.

“Our father is dying,” he says evenly. “Pancreatic cancer, as you might’ve heard.”

I blink. I haven’t heard. Why would I have—

“Your brothers know. They hacked into his clinic’s records,” Alexei says, answering my unspoken question. His eyes glitter harshly. “They didn’t tell you?”

I shake my head, stunned. How long have they known? And why wouldn’t they tell me? Unless... it was another case of my brothers treating me like a child, trying to shield me from any and all stress—just like when they didn’t tell me that Alexei was in the United States, looking for me and Slava.

They probably figured anything to do with the Leonovs could trigger another one of my headaches.

“I... I’m sorry.” The words emerge on autopilot.

Alexei lets out a rough bark of laughter. “No, you’re not.”

He’s right. I’m not. If anyone deserves this fate, it’s Boris Leonov. Which is why the peculiar ache in my chest doesn’t make any sense. “So is that why Slava—”

“Went to live with him after Ksenia’s death?” Ruslan interjects. His gray eyes glint with the same harsh light as Alexei’s. “You guessed it. It was our father’s dying wish: to get to know his grandson better.”

“A wish we should’ve never granted,” Alexei says tersely, and as I look from brother to brother, I realize I’m not the only one who believes that Boris Leonov deserves his suffering.

It’s written clear as day on Alexei and Ruslan’s faces.

I want to press further, to find out why they feel this way, but they won’t answer those questions, I can tell. If the two men’s expressions were closed off before, it’s nothing compared to the way they are now—each feature as cold and hard as if carved from ice. Especially Alexei’s.

“How long does your father have?” I ask quietly, looking at my husband. I shouldn’t feel any sympathy for him, but that’s what the ache in my chest is. I recognize it now, the dull, squeezing pain that reminds me of the way I felt when I learned about Ksenia’s fatal accident.

It’s as if Alexei’s loss, his grief, were mine—and in the case of his father, also the dark anger underlying it.

The same anger I feel each time I think about *my* father.

“Weeks,” Ruslan answers before Alexei gets a chance. “Possibly less. The cancer has already spread into every vital organ. The doctors say it’s a miracle he’s still alive.”

My gaze is trained on Alexei as Ruslan speaks, so I see the tiny, almost imperceptible way he stiffens at the last sentence. My chest squeezes tighter. However much of a monster Boris Leonov may be, he’s still Alexei’s father—just like the monster who sired me was mine.

Despite everything, to this day, there’s a tiny part of me that longs for the Papa of my childhood, the man who once gave me a ride on his shoulders and bought me birthday cake when Mama wouldn’t. Those memories, sparse as they are, shine brightly in my mind—especially since the rest of the time, my father was indifferent to me at best.

“I’m sorry,” I say again, and this time, I mean it. I don’t know for sure if Alexei has those rare, bright memories of *his* father, but I suspect he does.

It’s highly probable that when it comes to our families and their fucked-up-ness, we have much in common.

At my words, something moves over Alexei’s face, the hard, expressionless mask cracking for a moment. “Thank you, Alinyonok,” he says softly and lays his hand over mine, blanketing me with its warmth and strength... with the comforting illusion that we belong together.

Except we don’t. We never have.

He’s inserted himself into my life by deceit and force, and he’s about to do way worse.

Fighting against my every instinct, I yank my hand away, ignoring the way his face tightens as if from a blow—and how the ache in my chest sharpens at the loss of his warmth. Alexei

doesn't need my sympathy. This urge to comfort him, to take away his pain—it's as irrational as it is dangerous. We don't belong together just because our families are messed up and I understand what he's going through. That's not enough for me to forgive all the awful things he's done—and plans to do.

“You know what? I'm already full,” Ruslan murmurs, rising to his feet. “Please convey my compliments to Vika. Everything was delicious, as always.”

Neither Alexei nor I respond to his words. The air between us pulses with renewed tension—a tension that only intensifies when Ruslan departs, leaving us sitting at the table, eyes locked on each other.

“Why?” Alexei's lips barely move as he speaks, his voice low and filled with poorly controlled fury. “Why the fuck won't you give us a chance?”

“Because you're not what I want.” It's the truth but also a partial lie—and realizing that pushes me to go further, to hit harder, however reckless that may be. “You, my father, my brothers—you're all the same. You take what you want without regard for anyone else, with no consideration for the costs or consequences.” His face darkens dangerously as I speak, but I've gone too far to stop now. “You manipulated my family into agreeing to this fucked-up betrothal when I was just a child, then stalked me for a decade. You killed every man who had the misfortune of finding me attractive, and you murdered God knows how many of my brother's guards. You forced me into your bed and into this marriage. And you expect me to embrace you?”

“Yes.” The answer, blunt and uncompromising, slams into me like a wrecking ball. Gone is any hint of tenderness in his midnight gaze. The man looking at me now is the terrifying

stalker of my nightmares, the demon who has reigned supreme over my life since our fateful meeting eleven years ago. His eyes glow like coals in a fireplace as he leans in and says evenly, “That’s exactly what I expect, my beauty. And that’s exactly what’s happening—starting today.”

CHAPTER 16

ALEXEI

She stares at me defiantly, the very picture of bravery with her chin raised high, but I see the fear underneath. Fear of me, of what I'm going to do to her.

I hate it. I hate that it has to be this way between us, nearly as much as I hate the words she's thrown at me—all the more so because nothing she's said is untrue. I *am* a ruthless bastard who takes whatever he wants, and from the moment I saw her, I've wanted her. And she, no matter how much she denies it, has wanted me.

"Finish your food," I say as she stares at me, her jade eyes enormous in her pale face. "You'll need the energy."

Her throat ripples in a swallow. "I'm not hungry."

"Eat, or I will tie you down and hand-feed you."

Her delicate nostrils flare, but she picks up her spoon. Her bowl of grechka is nearly full—she's barely had a few bites so far—and I watch her eat it slowly, reluctantly, her eyes downcast.

Maybe I should've hand-fed her. Fuck knows we both enjoyed it the last time.

I bet if she were chained to my bed, we'd enjoy it even more.

Blood rushes to my cock at the thought, arousal mixing with the anger humming inside me. Before Alina, I didn't think I was into this sort of thing—a good, hard fuck had always been enough to satisfy me—but I can't deny that I enjoyed using her mouth roughly and the needy way she clung to me afterward. Nor can I refute the fact that over the years, my fantasies about her have grown progressively darker. It's as if the frustration of not having her for so long has tainted what was once straightforward, uncomplicated lust, turning it into a compulsion to dominate and own, to crush every ounce of her resistance until she's utterly and completely mine.

It's a compulsion I've done my best to fight, but no longer. Despite all my efforts to be patient and accommodating, she thinks of me as a monster, so I might as well act like one.

Nothing else has worked.

I wait until her bowl is empty and she's had a few more sips of her orange juice before I stand up and step over to her seat. "Get up." My voice is hard as I pull her chair out. "Let's go."

She rises to her feet slowly, her face pale as she gazes up at me pleadingly. "Alexei..."

I grip her elbow. "Walk, or I will carry you."

I can hear her quick, indrawn breath, sense her searching for ways to delay the inevitable, and my resolve solidifies. I've been patient and understanding, and it has gotten me nowhere. Each time I've given in to her pleas, I've regretted it—and so has she.

In hindsight, I should've overcome my scruples about her youth and taken her when she was fifteen, made her mine in every way but the physical. Yes, it would've involved stealing

her away from her family and would've likely started a war with the Molotovs, but that's where we've ended up anyway, only after having wasted a decade.

“Alexei, please.” Her voice shakes as I shepherd her down the stairs. “It’s only morning. Can’t it wait? I... I still have a headache.”

“Then a few orgasms might help.”

She’s lying about the headache, of course; she told me less than an hour ago that she’s completely fine. I’m not surprised, but I am strangely disappointed that she’d use her very real condition as a clichéd excuse. Regardless, it’s not going to work. I tighten my grip on her elbow as she stumbles on the last stair, and then I tug her down the hallway toward the cabin, ignoring her attempts to dig her heels in.

Opening the door, I drag her in and shut it behind us. Only then do I let her go. She immediately backs away, her chest heaving.

“Alexei...” Her voice holds a desperate entreaty. “Don’t do this, please.”

“Don’t do what? Make love to my wife?”

“Love?” She gives a sharp, bitter laugh. “Is that what this is for you?”

Her words cut like a cleaver. Is it love? I’ve never thought of it that way. Obsession, want, need, compulsion—it’s easier to pin those words on the witch’s brew inside me. But maybe that’s what love is, this constant, all-consuming craving that makes it impossible to picture my life without her.

Not that it matters to her either way. She doesn’t feel the same. But she will. Once my child is in her belly, she’ll have

no choice but to accept that she is mine. First, though, I have to ensure that it happens, and that means no more delays.

Without further ado, I begin to strip. My actions are methodical, deliberate. She needs to know that I'm not an animal driven by lust but a man set on a goal—that I won't be swayed, no matter how prettily she begs me. Not that lust isn't part of it. I hunger for her with an intensity that scares even me. Still, I'm in control, even if that control is hanging by a thread.

She freezes in place, staring at me as I make short work of my clothes, throwing them onto a nearby chair. Her lips part, as if she wants to say something, but no words emerge from her throat. Instead, she swallows visibly, and the tip of her tongue darts over her lower lip, wetting it in a quick, covert gesture as her gaze homes in on my jutting erection.

My balls tighten with a surge of lust so intense it steals my breath. When I can speak, my voice is thick, guttural. "Take off your dress."

She lifts her eyes to mine. "No." Her voice shakes. "I-I won't."

A rough laugh escapes my throat. "Is that the game you want to play, my beauty?"

She takes another step back. "It's not a game. I want you to leave me alone."

"You know that's not happening." My tone is soft, almost gentle despite the hunger raging inside me. Because it *is* a game, one in which she wants me to play the villain. And today I'm happy to oblige.

Twisting my lips into a dark smile, I start toward her with a slow, determined stride. She gulps and her gaze darts around

the room, as if looking for a place to run. There isn't one, of course. The cabin isn't small, but it's not huge, and the only exit is behind me. And even if, by some miracle, she made it past me, we're on a boat in the middle of the ocean.

She must come to the same conclusion because her eyes return to my face, resigned yet somehow still defiant. "I'll hate you for this," she warns, and I laugh grimly, stopping in front of her.

"Don't you already?"

"Not like this. I'll—"

"You can give me all the details later."

And hooking my fingers into the bodice of her pretty dress, I rip it apart.

CHAPTER 17

ALINA

I gasp, my hands flying up at the sudden violence of his movements, but the dress is already a goner, dropping to the floor in a puddle of sky-blue silk and leaving me dressed in nothing but my thong-and-bra set and high-heeled sandals. My instinct is to jump back, but he has anticipated that. Catching my wrists, he pulls me to him with an iron grip, a taunting smile still decorating his lips.

“Should’ve taken it off when asked, Alinyonok,” he says, like a parent lecturing a child. “We don’t have an infinite supply of dresses here, you know.”

“Then stop ripping them!” Too late, I realize I’ve taken the bait. I drag in a shaky breath, trying to ignore the furious pounding of my heart and the way his fingers are like iron shackles around my wrists, keeping my elbows bent and my lower body all but touching his fully erect cock. “I told you, I don’t want—”

He cuts me off with a kiss. His lips are rough, his tongue almost violent as it forces its way inside my mouth, yet arousal floods my body, pinching my nipples into hard pebbles and softening my core. It takes everything I have not to melt against him. Instead, I begin to struggle with all my strength,

battling the tidal wave of desire threatening to swamp me, fighting against myself more than against him.

It's a fight I'm bound to lose, but I still derive satisfaction from the way he jolts when I sink my teeth into his lower lip and taste the coppery tang of blood. It's definitely *his* blood, not mine this time, and I feel a deep, dark pleasure at the knowledge. I've marked him like he's marked me, pierced his flesh like he's pierced mine. I might not have stolen his virginity, but my imprint is now on his body, even if the bite won't leave a scar.

On a strange impulse, I suck his injured lip into my mouth, drawing out more of the metallic flavor, and he growls low in his throat, releasing my wrists to grip the back of my neck with one hand and my ass with the other, pulling me flush against his massive erection as his teeth sink into *my* lower lip. I use my newfound freedom to claw at his back, even as I wrap my left leg around his hip, grinding my aching clit against the swollen length of his cock, driven by a burning need that defies all reason. The flimsy lace of my thong is the only obstacle between our naked bodies, and it's already drenched, soaked with the evidence of my desire. Under different circumstances, I'd be mortified, but there's no room for embarrassment in the erotic inferno consuming me. Already, the tension is coiling in my core, each shimmy of my hips rubbing my clit against his hardness, dragging me closer to the edge even as our mouths remain locked in a battle of teeth and tongues and lips. The same battle our bodies are fighting.

It's a battle in which there can only be one winner, and that winner isn't me.

Or maybe it is me. Maybe the incandescent pleasure bursting through my nerve endings is a victory, not a defeat, I think hazily as my inner muscles clench and release in a spine-tingling cascade of sensations while my fingers dig into the thick muscles of his shoulders. In a way, I stole this orgasm, took it instead of having it forced upon me. I used his body as —

The sudden tug on my thong that rips it off jerks me out of my pleasure haze and into reality. With a gasp, I tear away from his devouring kiss and drop my leg, pushing on his shoulders with all my might as the stark knowledge of what we're doing penetrates my serotonin-saturated brain. Only it's too late and he's shoving me up against a wall, gripping my thighs to lift me up and spread me open.

Before I can utter a single word, the smooth, broad head of his cock presses against my soaked entrance and forces its way into my body. He's not rough, but he's not gentle either, and my breath escapes on a pained cry as his thick length stretches me to the max. I'm still sore from the other day, unused to the massive girth of him, and my nails dig into his skin as he pauses halfway, pressing his forehead to the top of my head, his harsh breath audible as every muscle in his powerful body vibrates from the effort of holding still.

“Are you okay?” His voice is raw and strained. “Am I hurting you?”

Yes! Stop! That's what I should say, but somehow, the word that emerges from my throat is a breathless, stuttering, “N-no.”

Immediately, I want to take it back, but I don't get a chance. I'm clutching at his shoulders, so I feel the shudder that goes down his spine as he lets go of his rigid self-control,

and then his hips piston into me, his hard cock spearing me so deeply my breath whooshes out of my lungs. For a second, the stretch is more than I can bear, but then he pulls back and spears me again, grinding his pelvis into mine, and the stinging pain lessens, the discomfort transforming into a familiar aching tightness, a sweetly agonizing tension that intensifies each time he bottoms out inside me.

“Fuck,” he rasps against my hair. “You feel so fucking good.” Each word is punctuated by a deep, hard thrust that shoves me higher up the wall and wrenches a grunting moan from my throat.

Good isn’t the word for it. As he sets a hard, driving pace, I feel like I’m going to die, like he’s going to literally fuck my brains out. My eyes roll into the back of my skull, and I scrunch my eyelids shut as my mind empties of everything but the violent sensations rocking my body. I know there’s something not right about this, something I should be fighting, but for the life of me, I can’t think what. There’s just Alexei, spearing into my flesh, filling me so deeply I may never be whole without him again.

The orgasm is like a surge of lava inside me, rushing up under tremendous pressure, filling me with heat until I reach a point of no return. Until I explode and shatter into a thousand pieces with his name a choked scream on my lips and my inner muscles spasming around him, milking his cock as he pounds into me, faster and harder. He’s going to come too, any second now, I can feel it, and somewhere in the back of my mind, a voice of sanity pipes up, quietly at first, then louder and more insistently.

My eyes fly open as I remember what it was that I couldn’t allow. “Stop!” The plea comes out weak, breathless, and he

doesn't hear me, or if he does, he ignores it. I try harder, gripping his hair to pull his head back. "Alexei, please... don't come inside me!"

His eyes meet mine, the glittering dark orbs feral and uncomprehending. He's too far gone to stop, even if he wanted to. But then a flicker of comprehension passes over his tightly drawn face, and his thrusting pace slows.

I exhale in relief, relaxing my grasp on his hair.

He heard me.

He'll stop.

He—

He sets his jaw, his eyes turning hard and gem-like, and he plunges into me so deeply I cry out as he hits my cervix. His gaze is still holding mine as he shudders all over and, buried deep inside me, begins to come.

CHAPTER 18

ALEXEI

Each time I've given in to Alina's pleas, I've regretted it. And I would've regretted it this time too—or so I tell myself as I listen to her cry after one of the most incredible experiences of my life. I'm holding her, but it doesn't matter. The gulf between us is enormous, insurmountable. Even though she's naked in my arms, her wet face buried in my chest, she may as well be locked in her brother's compound a thousand miles away, unreachable, untouchable.

She's crying quietly, without any drama or accusations, yet every tear that falls on my skin burns like hot wax. My chest feels heavy and tight, each breath requiring effort.

I didn't think it would be like this.

I didn't know her misery would feel like butter knives cutting me into small pieces.

“Stop,” she said, and I didn't. Because in that moment, all I could think about was filling her with my seed, binding her to me in the most primitive way possible. It's what I'd decided on, what I'd determined would be best for both of us. So why do I feel like I've fucked up? Like I've just broken something beautiful and fragile? There was nothing to break. She claimed to hate me anyway. And yet... I squeeze my eyes shut,

listening to her quiet snuffles, and when she pushes at my chest to free herself, I let her go.

She grabs the robe and dashes to the bathroom. I watch her slender figure disappear inside, every muscle in my body tense despite the earth-shattering release I've just experienced. I want to go after her, to tell her... what? What the fuck can I tell her?

That I won't do it again?

That would be a lie.

That I'm sorry?

She'd laugh in my face.

Motherfucker.

I roll over and punch a pillow.

It's not enough. I need something harder. Or *someone*.

That's it. I jump to my feet and throw on my pants before striding out of the cabin. Ruslan should've gone home by now, but since he's still here, he might as well be of use.

I find him in his cabin, taking a nap. At my entrance, he yawns and sits up, rubbing his face.

I throw him a pair of jeans. "Get the fuck up."

His expression sharpens, all traces of sleep vanishing from his face. "What happened?" He leaps off the bed and yanks on the jeans without bothering with underwear. Like me, he sleeps in the nude. "Did—"

"Deck. Now." I turn and head to the stairs. A few seconds later, Ruslan catches up to me, and we go up together.

He must've figured out my mood because he doesn't ask any more questions, and when we reach the deck, he goes on

the defensive immediately, lifting his fists to protect his face as I throw the first punch.

We fight silently, grunting only when one or the other makes contact. It's midday and the sun is brutal overhead, but neither of us gives a damn. We're used to fighting in subzero cold and in scorching heat, in rain and in snow, on rooftops and knee-deep in mud.

If there's one thing our father did right, it was hiring Spetznaz soldiers to train us from kindergarten age onward. I didn't appreciate it in the first few years, but now, a good, hard fight and other forms of physical exertion is how I keep my equilibrium. It's also how I've been able to get through all those years of waiting for my bride without going mad.

It's ironic that I have her now, and I still need this outlet.

If anything, I need it more than ever.

"So, what the fuck happened?" Ruslan asks as we enjoy two cold beers under the overhang afterward. We've mostly avoided hitting each other in the face, but below the neck, he's going to be hurting and so am I. However, the heavy pressure in my chest is gone for the moment, replaced by a cleansing post-battle high.

"None of your fucking business," I say, pressing the cold bottle to my sweat-drenched face. I have no intention of confiding in him about my troubles with my wife. He'd only say he told me so.

He doesn't leave it alone. "Is it Alina?" he prods, and I grit my teeth as the tension I've gotten rid of creeps back in, bunching my shoulders. "Did she do something? Say something?"

Fuck this. I tip back the bottle and down the remainder of my beer before setting it on the table with a clank. “Thanks for the workout.”

If I don’t go right now, we’re going to have another one, and it won’t end in cold beers.

THE SHOWER IS RUNNING WHEN I GET BACK TO THE CABIN after a quick rinse and a clothing change in my office. Alina is still in the bathroom after—I frown, glancing at my phone—nearly an hour. What the fuck is she doing in there? I’m tempted to knock and demand that she open the bathroom door, but then I recall her quiet tears.

Fuck.

I scrub my hand down my face, wishing I could erase the memory from my brain. Not of the sex—I’m banking those images forever—but of the aftermath. Of the dull, illogical thrumming of guilt deep in my chest. And there’s something else, a peculiar unease that I can’t pinpoint—one that, now that I’m thinking about it, doesn’t seem directly related to Alina’s tears.

It’s like something is plucking at a string in the corner of my mind, making it vibrate out of tune. I get that feeling sometimes when there’s danger. Is that what this is? Is there something I overlooked when I took Alina from Nikolai’s compound? Could I have left behind some clue that will lead her brothers to us?

Dammit.

Leaving Alina to her mega-long shower, I turn on my heel and head back to my office.

I'm not afraid of the Molotovs. Even if Alina and I were in Moscow, parading out in the open, they wouldn't be able to take her from me. But there would be bloodshed. Lots of bloodshed, and that's not what I want when my marriage is so fresh and new. It's bad enough I had to resort to violence to get my bride to honor our betrothal agreement. What Alina and I need now is time to ourselves, a long, leisurely honeymoon where we can get to know each other without the interference of her family, especially since she wouldn't look kindly upon me if I were to kill some of said family. That's why I settled on this yacht as a place to hide out for a while—but the plan only works if her brothers can't find us.

Unlike in Moscow or some other stronghold of ours, I don't have the resources here to fight off the army they'd bring.

I log on to my computer and fire off a message to our security team in Moscow. They're keeping tabs on the Molotovs, so if Alina's brothers are making any moves, I should know soon enough. I also tell our hackers to double-check that there's no paper or online trail that would link this boat to us or betray its location. Then I drum my fingers on my desk, going over every recollection I have of my attack on Nikolai's compound, trying to think of anything that could be generating this unsettled feeling.

Nobody got close enough to stick a tracker on me. Alina doesn't have any on her either; I visually checked every inch of her skin while she was under and ran a scanner over her body to make sure. I also got rid of her clothes and anything else that could be hiding a GPS locator.

So what is it then? Why do I feel like there's a sniper's laser on my forehead?

Sitting back, I blow out a frustrated breath.

What the fuck am I missing?

Nothing comes to mind, so I push to my feet and go back to the bedroom cabin, where my wife is hopefully done with her shower.

CHAPTER 19

ALINA

I'm still huddled on the tile floor of the shower, knees drawn up against my chest, when the water changes from scalding hot to moderately warm and then barely lukewarm. The sensation is unpleasant, so I get up and turn off the water before it runs fully cold.

I guess I've pushed the water heater on this yacht past its limits.

The good news is I've managed to stop crying. The bad news: I still want to scrub myself inside out with bleach, even though I know it would be futile. If Alexei's swimmers are anything like him, they're already at their destination, roping my poor egg into a union it doesn't want.

What the fuck was I thinking, giving in to him? Participating so eagerly, so wantonly in my own destruction? That is, until the very last moment, when I recovered just enough sanity to tell him no—which he ignored, of course.

He's stated his intentions for me, plain as day. Why did I think I could sway him with a last-second plea? A plea that would've been a hell of a lot more persuasive if I hadn't just come all over his cock.

My face burns as I wrap a towel around myself and face the mirror. I hate the woman looking back at me, with her red,

swollen eyes and flushed, blotchy skin. I want to erase her out of existence, so I do exactly that, painting over her with foundation, mascara, lipstick—whatever it takes to cover the raw mess she is inside. Blow-dryer and flat iron are next, and by the time my hair is dry and smooth, I'm more or less my usual self, if still a bit shaky.

Alexei is sitting on the bed when I emerge from the bathroom. I'm once again dressed in nothing but a towel, and his scorching stare doesn't help my equilibrium one bit. I want to slap his face, and at the same time, I want to run and hide.

To his credit, he doesn't look smug. Instead, his expression is shuttered, his eyes unreadable aside from the heat glimmering in their dark depths.

Ignoring him, I pad over to the walk-in closet and grab the first dress my hand lands on—which happens to be a bright yellow cotton sundress that in no way reflects my mood. Black tulle would be far more appropriate, but I don't want to risk Alexei coming into the closet after me, so I make do with my first find. And because I can't help myself, I slip on a pair of white wedge sandals that are more casual than what I'd normally wear but that go with the summery vibe of the dress. I accessorize it all with a pearl necklace and little pearl stud earrings because why the fuck not? Let's just pretend we're sweethearts going to a church picnic.

He's on his feet when I come out, a big, dark, imposing figure that makes my palms sweat and my heart beat faster.

God, I hate him. I really do.

I raise my chin as high as I can and try to walk past him.

He catches me by my elbow and forces me to face him. "Are you okay?" His deep voice is quiet, serious, his eyes

roaming searchingly over my face.

If I didn't know better, I'd think he's worried.

“What do you care?” I try to twist out of his grasp. “You got what you wanted. Now leave me be.”

He doesn't release me. His eyes narrow, and his lips curve in that darkly mocking smile I've come to know so well. “You know I can't do that, Alinyonok. If I could, I would've done so long ago.”

Can't argue with that fucked-up logic.

I close my eyes in defeat, and by the time I open them, he's released my elbow in favor of clasp my hand in his big palm.

“Why don't we go up on the deck?” he suggests, his smile softening as he looks down at me. “It's supposed to rain later this afternoon, so this is our chance to enjoy the sunshine.”

I bare my teeth in a mirthless smile. “Aren't you afraid I'll burn to a crisp or something?”

“Oh, I'll cover you with sunblock, don't worry.”

My stomach pitches in a peculiar, almost queasy way.

No. I can't possibly be turned on right now. Not after he's just done that horrible thing to me. I should be repulsed by the mere idea of his hands anywhere on me, but apparently, my body has other ideas.

Then again, maybe I just ate something off and am actually feeling queasy.

I yank my hand out of his grip. “I'll sunblock myself, thank you very much.”

Without waiting for his reply, I march back into the bathroom and cover every inch of my exposed skin with a thick white layer that I purposefully don't rub in all the way, so he can see it. I even do it on my face, even though everything inside me cringes at the way I look afterward—like the ghost of a geisha.

Mineral sunblock does *not* go well on top of makeup.

Fighting the urge to remove it and fix my face, I return to the bedroom, where Alexei nods approvingly at the white cast.

“Where's yours?” I ask, just to be difficult.

I don't care if he gets skin cancer, I really don't.

He shrugs in a typically male fashion. “I don't need it. My skin is darker, so—”

“So that gives you SPF 5 protection, tops, and the UV index is probably above 10 right now.” I fold my arms over my chest. “I'm not going up if you're not covered also.”

He arches his eyebrows, a smirk tugging at his lips. “Already acting like a wife, are we?”

Fuck him. He can roast himself to a crisp for all I care. In fact, I hope he gets skin cancer and dies. I hope it happens tomorrow, so I can throw his sunburned body overboard and feed the sharks some human barbecue. Or better yet—

“Okay, I'll do it,” he says, cutting into my bloodthirsty fantasies, and to my shock, he goes into the bathroom.

When he comes out a minute later, his face, neck, and arms have a distinct white cast that looks much more prominent on his tan, tattooed skin. There are also white smudges on the collar of his black T-shirt. The whole thing should make him look ridiculous, but it doesn't.

He's still the hottest, most dangerous man I've ever seen.

With effort, I look away. "Let me grab a hat and sunglasses."

I step into the closet, grab the items in question—a wide-brimmed straw hat and a pair of oversized shades—and head toward the door. He follows, easily falling into step next to me as we exit into the hallway. We walk in silence, and I can't help sneaking glances at him as we go up the stairs. For once, he's not focused on me with his usual hyper-intensity. Instead, he seems lost in thought, his dark eyebrows pleated into a small frown.

Did something happen? If so, when? How?

Curiosity gnaws at me, but I hold back the questions. I don't want to start a conversation with him, to pretend that everything is forgiven and forgotten. Because it's not. What he did to me today is worse than storming Nikolai's compound to kidnap me. Worse even than arranging our betrothal, though I don't entirely understand why.

No, I'm not talking to him if I can help it. I may not be able to deny him my body, but my mind is still under my control.

"There you two lovebirds are," a familiar voice drawls as we step out onto the deck, and I turn to see Ruslan climbing over the top of the ladder on the starboard side. He must've just taken a dip in the ocean because he's dripping wet and dressed in nothing but a pair of swimming trunks.

Some devil takes a hold of me, and all of a sudden, I know the perfect way to get back at Alexei. Unabashedly, I stare at Ruslan's naked chest and lick my lips, as if they've gone dry. It's a nice chest, for sure, but it generates the same level of

response in me as a marble statue would. But my husband doesn't know that. He's insanely jealous and possessive, and if I know him even a little...

"Take a dive. Now," he growls at his brother in a tone that brooks no disagreement, and then he grips my arm and spins me to face him.

"What?" I ask innocently, batting my eyelashes for good measure as the sound of a splash reaches my ears. I guess Ruslan knows when to listen. "What's wrong?" I continue in the same confused tone.

I have no idea why I'm trying to provoke my new husband. I remember his terrifying reaction the last time he thought I paid too much attention to Ruslan, and I don't want to be subjected to it again. But at the same time, I want to lash out at Alexei, to make him feel at least a fraction of the devastation he's forced upon me.

His face is midnight dark, his nostrils flared as he stares down at me. Fatalistically, I wait for him to tell me that I belong to him, that I'm to have eyes for no man but him. I wait for him to show his dominance over me in the most primitive way possible, but he doesn't. Instead, he takes a deep breath, then another, and releases my arm.

"Don't," he says evenly. "Just don't."

I blink, too stunned to say anything as he goes under the overhang and prepares two lounge chairs, facing them away from the glare of the afternoon sun. As if summoned telepathically, Larson appears with two frosty, fruity drinks that he sets on the small table between the two chairs.

"Thank you," Alexei tells him, pulling off his T-shirt and stretching out on one of the loungers, and Larson nods before

disappearing to do whatever captain-y things he does.

I follow Alexei's example, doing my best to keep my eyes off his naked chest as I arrange myself comfortably on my chair. By now, I've seen and felt every inch of Alexei's hard body, so it shouldn't be all *that* fascinating. But it is, at least if the low thrum of heat between my thighs is anything to go by. I cross my legs, trying my best not to squeeze them together, and close my eyes because that's the best, if not the only, way to keep myself from ogling all those muscles and tattoos.

Alexei is quiet beside me, with only the sound of the waves gently splashing against the hull breaking the silence, and when I peek at him from underneath my eyelashes, I find that he's closed his eyes as well, though his eyebrows are still drawn together.

I have no intention of speaking to him, truly, but something about seeing him like this, pretending to be relaxed when he's just as tense as I am, makes it impossible to maintain the silence.

"Don't you care that I don't want this?" My voice is low and bitter. I don't know why I'm bringing this up when the answer is obvious—he *doesn't* care—but my tongue seems to be operating of its own accord.

He opens his eyes and pushes up onto his elbow, facing me. "What *do* you want?" His gaze holds genuine curiosity.

"For you to leave me alone!"

He makes a curt, dismissive gesture, as if I've just spoken nonsense. "What are your life's goals? Or at least career goals? If you had all the freedom in the world, what would you do?"

I stare at him, momentarily stumped by the question. No one's ever asked me that before. With my inheritance, I won't

ever need to lift a finger in any sort of productive capacity, and everyone, my brothers included, assumes I won't. To the world, I'm a socialite, a pretty but ultimately useless member of high society, and on some level, I've accepted that role, focusing all my mental energy on trying *not* to be something—Alexei's bride. And yet, there's one thing I've always wanted, a childhood dream I've only shared with Konstantin.

"I..." I dampen my lips. "I guess I'd make video games."

"Ah." Alexei doesn't look as surprised as I would've expected. "So why haven't you? You've been out of college for three years now. That's plenty of time to get started on any career path you want."

Why haven't I, indeed? I think back to the dark blur that was my college years, when headaches kept me from spending any real length of time on a computer. Did I give up on my dream then? Or was it later, when social obligations kept me hopping from party to party, fundraiser to fundraiser, vacation to vacation, all the while trying to avoid the dangerous man shadowing my life? It wasn't until I left Moscow for the solitude and natural beauty of Nikolai's mountain compound that I even remembered how much I'd once enjoyed learning code and creating the visual stories that are video games.

My fourteen-year-old self would be ashamed of me, and in this moment, so am I.

"I've started working on a game," I admit, looking away from Alexei's piercing stare. "It's just a small, simple one, but —"

"That's great. Where is it?"

I blink, returning my gaze to his face. "What do you mean?"

“Is it in the cloud? On some hard drive? In general, what would you need to continue working on it?”

I stare at him, stunned. Is he offering what I think he’s offering? My heart picks up pace, a glimmer of hope sparking inside me. “Just any powerful computer with the proper software would work. What I’ve written thus far *is* in the cloud, so I’d need access to the internet and then—”

“Give me your login, and I’ll grab it off the cloud for you.”

The glimmer of hope winks out. Of course he wouldn’t just hand me an internet-connected laptop and hope for the best. If I do get a computer, it won’t have so much as dial-up AOL. And giving him my login? As if.

“I can have my hackers work on it if you’d prefer,” Alexei says, accurately surmising my thoughts. His dark eyes gleam. “It’ll take longer, but—”

“Fine.” I take a breath. “Fine, I’ll give it to you.” Not because I think his hackers will get through the encryption Konstantin developed for our family, but because they won’t—and I do want my game and a computer. I want it so badly my fingers literally itch to touch the keyboard. More importantly, I don’t have anything particularly private in my personal cloud, just school assignments, photos, and such. Valery handles my inheritance and investments, so I won’t be giving Alexei a back door to the Molotov business holdings or anything along those lines.

“Good. And tell me what software you need installed.”

I tell him. My heart is pounding with excitement again, but this time, it has nothing to do with the possibility of escape. Until this moment, I didn’t realize how much I needed this—to

think about something other than the man beside me, to work on problems that actually have solutions.

“Okay,” Alexei says and lies back, closing his eyes. “You’ll have it all by tomorrow.”

I lie back too, and for the first time since he came for me, I find myself looking forward to the next morning.

CHAPTER 20

ALEXEI

I don't nap. I don't even sleep particularly deeply, as my ears are always tuned for danger. Yet on this warm, humid afternoon, with the thick clouds gathering on the horizon and bringing the distant smell of rain, I close my eyes and drift off with Alina at my side.

The dream creeps in slowly. On some level, I'm aware that it's a dream. It has that soft, hazy quality to it, as if I were entering into a fog. But then the fog becomes all that is real, and I forget that anything else exists outside of it.

There's a woman. A heavily pregnant woman. She's soft and warm. She smells like vanilla and lemons. I burrow closer to her side. Strangely, I fit there, under her arm, even though I'm a big man. Except... I'm not.

I'm small.

I'm a child.

The realization should be shocking, but it's not. I burrow closer to the woman, listening to her melodious voice, one of my little hands resting on her huge belly. *Mama*. The word comes to me from the fog, and I accept it, just as I accept the knowledge that inside that belly is my baby sister.

Mama is speaking. No, she's reading. There's a book in her hands.

I sigh contentedly, listening to the story, feeling my baby sister kick inside Mama's belly. "She's playing football," Papa would always say. I'm jealous. I want to play football with her. Ruslan is too young to be any good at it right now, but maybe my baby sister is better. She's getting lots of practice.

Kick. Kick. Kick.

They're getting stronger.

Mama stiffens.

No, that's wrong. That's not how it goes.

There's something red on the sheets.

No, no, no.

The sheets are soaked now, covered with blood.

"Mama?" My voice goes high. "Mama, are you going to die?"

Kick. Kick. Kick.

The huge belly ripples, and I feel it beginning to tear. No, not tear. It's being sliced open from the inside. My baby sister. She has a knife.

The blood is everywhere, coating Mama, covering me. My heart beats like the wings of a trapped bird, and I feel sick. I scramble off the bed and start running. But my feet don't move. I'm frozen in place, unable to go for help.

The belly splits.

Mama screams.

"Alexei?"

I jackknife to a sitting position, the fog evaporating in a burst of light.

“Are you okay?” Alina asks, sitting up to stare at me with unconcealed concern, and I realize my breathing is labored, like I’ve just sprinted ten miles.

I force myself to take a deep breath and slowly let it out.

A dream. It was just a fucking dream. Somehow, I managed to fall asleep out here and have a nightmare.

As a kid, I used to have nightmares after Mom died. I don’t remember all the details, but there was always something about blood. It’s been years—no, decades—since I’ve had one. Were they always this vivid?

My voice is hoarse as I attempt to speak. “It was just a dream.”

I don’t know if I’m trying to convince Alina or myself.

She nods, but she doesn’t lie back down. Instead, she regards me with a curiosity that I’d appreciate at any other time. “What was it about?” she asks softly.

Blood. A C-section gone wrong. A baby killing the woman I loved.

My stomach twists, and I taste bile.

Swinging my feet off the lounge, I stand up. “Excuse me. There’s something I have to do.” My voice is strained, my throat so tight it’s a wonder I can get the words out as I step away on legs that feel like I’m coming off a three-day bender.

I don’t know where I’m going. The yacht suddenly feels too small, a prison of my own making. Fuck, even the ocean around us is too small to contain the emotions welling up inside me. As a child, I did my best not to think about my

mother and her death. I let myself forget the softness of her embrace, so I didn't have to remember her screams at the end. I never forgot that she died from childbirth complications, of course, but the memory of that day slowly faded until it felt like a story I'd heard on the news rather than something that had devastated my life. The nightmares faded too, and by the time I entered my teens, I was able to talk about my mother's death as dispassionately as befits the son of Boris Leonov—and to think about pregnancy and childbirth the way everyone does: without giving much thought to the risks the process entails.

My throat tightens further, threatening to choke off my air. I'm already by the staircase—on autopilot, I was heading below the deck—but I reverse course and beeline for the hull, where I dive overboard, not bothering with the ladder.

The shock of being submerged in cool water clears away the remnants of the nightmare, and by the time I surface, I can actually breathe.

I also know what's been nagging at me, and it isn't anything to do with the Molotovs coming after us.

When Alina disappeared from Moscow, I felt betrayed. It was irrational, as she'd never claimed to care for me or to want our marriage, but her behavior at the fundraiser had given me hope that she was starting to come around. The sympathy on her face when she'd expressed her condolences about Ksenia's death wasn't feigned, and neither was her passionate response when I took her hymen in the coatroom afterward. That night felt like a new beginning for us—and then she disappeared.

She fled at the first hint of real intimacy between us.

As I searched for her, I concocted my plan. It was as simple as it was ruthless: find her, marry her, and bind her to

me with a child. Or better yet, children, plural. I didn't think of anything beyond that, such as what bringing children into this world could do to her. What it could mean for her health and safety.

Not once did I consider the possibility that she could die while giving birth, like my mother.

Bile surges into my throat again, sour and metallic despite the salt water coating my lips. I dive and swim underwater with hard, furious strokes, heading away from the boat, away from the terrible fear gripping me—a fear that must've been percolating in my subconscious all this time, even as I executed my plan over Alina's objections.

It's a fear I now can't shake off.

I surface for a breath, then dive under again and swim. I swim until my arms feel heavy and the boat is but a speck on the horizon. Only then do I turn back, driven by a primal, instinctual urge.

My wife.

I need her in my arms.

Now.

CHAPTER 21

ALINA

I let out a breath as the black dot that is Alexei's head emerges from the waves, this time a little closer.

He's swimming back. Finally.

I have no idea what happened, what prompted him to dive overboard like that, but I can't say I wasn't just a tiny bit concerned as he kept disappearing from view, each dive taking him so far underwater that he has to be at least part dolphin.

I suspect this weird behavior of his has to do with his falling asleep. I napped also, for a half hour or so, lulled into relaxation by the sound of the waves and the warm, humid breeze lapping at my skin. But Alexei's nap must've been deeper because he was still asleep when I opened my eyes. Asleep and strangely tense, with his eyebrows furrowed and his jaw tightly clenched.

Was he having a bad dream? I wasn't sure, so I watched him for a while, intrigued despite myself—because he really is a dangerously beautiful man.

It wasn't until his face twisted in a grimace and his breathing turned ragged that I called out his name, figuring I'd wake him just in case.

I blow out another breath, the knot between my shoulders unraveling as the powerful strokes of Alexei's arms bring him ever closer to the yacht. I'm not worried for him, I'm really not. I just... don't like the idea of him out there in the dark blue water, so far away I can barely see him. The clouds on the horizon are darkening and the wind is picking up, making the waves froth at the tips. Soon, we might be in the midst of a full-blown squall, and as strong of a swimmer as Alexei is, he's not immune to the forces of nature.

It doesn't help that the rising waves are making me a bit seasick. I hope it doesn't mean that another headache is on the way. For me, migraines and nausea often go hand in hand.

Finally, Alexei reaches the ladder on the starboard side. I watch as he hauls himself out of the waves, looking like a sea god with his black hair slicked back and his tattooed muscles gleaming wet and rippling with each movement. My heart pounds somewhere in the region of my throat, and despite my unsettled stomach, a curl of heat licks at my core.

No. Dammit. I need to stop this.

I move to step away from the hull and return to my lounge chair, but he's already at the top of the ladder, his eyes locking with mine. There's something savage in his expression, a dark, fierce intensity overlaying the carnal heat in his gaze.

I swallow and instinctively back away. He follows, stalking me like the lethal predator that he is. My heart pounds faster, and an electric current runs up and down my spine. Dragging in a shaky breath, I look away and turn toward the lounge chairs, hoping that by walking away, I can break the peculiar tension.

It's a mistake. I've barely taken a couple of steps before he's on me, spinning me around to face him with a wet hand

on my elbow.

“Alinyonok...” There’s a tortured note in his voice, even as dark fire blazes in his eyes. Releasing my elbow, he grips my face between his palms and stares down at me, his water-dappled chest rising and falling in a harsh, unsteady rhythm.

I stare back at him, my pulse roaring in my temples. I don’t know what’s happening, but it scares me. It feels like there’s a storm raging inside him, one that will drown us both if we’re not careful. Cautiously, I lay my hands over his wrists, feeling the brutal strength of his bones, tendons, and muscles. He’s not hurting me right now, but he could. So easily. Like my father hurt my mother.

Like he killed her before Nikolai killed him.

I must flinch, or make some kind of sound, because Alexei’s face twists, and with a tormented groan, he pulls me to him, bending his head to kiss me so fiercely I lose all the air in my lungs. He takes it all, every molecule of my oxygen, every thought in my mind, and by the time he swings me into his arms and starts toward the stairs, my body is on fire and the dark memories are distant, my fears once again nebulous, unvoiced. All except one...

“Wait,” I gasp, twisting in his arms as he carries me swiftly down the stairs and through the hallway. “Alexei, stop!”

He ignores me, like always. As he so vividly demonstrated this morning, my objections have never mattered to him. Reaching the cabin, he kicks open the door with complete disregard for his bare foot and brings me in before kicking it closed.

“I have to see you,” he says feverishly, laying me on the bed. His voice is raw as he reaches for my clothes. “Fuck,

Alinyonok... I have to feel you.”

Resigned, I close my eyes and turn my face to the side as he strips me naked with equal parts ruthless efficiency and feverish intensity. I already know how this scene is going to play out: he’s going to fuck me, I will come, and then he’ll come in me, making me hate him and myself.

In no time at all, I’m naked and he’s caressing my belly, cupping my breasts with his big hands, rubbing his thumbs over my nipples. His touch is frantic, yet there’s something off about it. Something almost... clinical.

What the fuck?

I open my eyes and turn my head to look at him.

He’s still wearing his wet swimming trunks, and they’re tenting with an unmistakably massive erection. However, the way he’s looking at my body doesn’t feel the least bit sexual. Even as he holds my breasts, one in each hand, he doesn’t seem interested in pleasure—mine or his. It’s like he’s examining me, the way a doctor would. What the—

He releases my breasts and steps back, shoving his fingers through his wet hair, the gesture filled with intense frustration. Confused, I stare at him as he squeezes his eyes shut, swears under his breath, and then leaves the cabin, the door banging shut behind him.

Seriously, what the fuck?

Suddenly painfully cognizant of my nakedness, I sit up and look down at my breasts. They seem okay to me, round and firm, my nipples a dusky rose-pink. My stomach is flat, even with the way I’m sitting all hunched over.

As far as I can tell, I haven’t suddenly turned into an ogre or sprouted horns in lieu of nipples.

Then again, men are fickle creatures. Maybe he's grown tired of me that quickly. Maybe the reality doesn't live up to whatever fantasies he's built up in his mind over the years.

I should be glad. I should celebrate this development, but instead, my heart squeezes into a tight little ball and shame crawls up my spine. If my mother were here, she'd tell me this is what I deserve for all those times I didn't listen to her, when I didn't exercise enough, or ate junk food, or didn't pluck my eyebrows. She'd say—

The door bangs open again, and Alexei strides back in, a small box in his hand.

Instinctively, I grab for the blanket to cover my nakedness, but he's already by the bed, eyes blazing. He plunks the box onto the blanket I'm clutching, and shock slams into me as I see what it is.

It's a box of condoms.

Magnum-sized, of course.

My gaze flies up to his, and he nods, jaw flexing.

"We'll do it this way going forward," he says gutturally and pulls me into his arms, slanting his lips over mine.

With burning hunger, he consumes me, and for the first time, I don't hate myself when I melt into his dark embrace.

CHAPTER 22

ALINA

The morning sun is shining on my face when I open my eyes and stretch luxuriously, feeling like a well-fed cat. I'm sore all over—Alexei didn't let me out of his bed all afternoon, evening, and night except for a quick dinner break—but I'm feeling good. And not just because I had a dozen orgasms as the yacht rocked in yet another storm. There's an unusual lightness in my chest, a buoyant sort of feeling. I'm almost... happy.

No. "Happy" is too strong a word considering I've been stolen from my family and forced into a marriage I don't want with a man who's stalked me for a decade. But I do feel hopeful. Optimistic, even. I don't know what happened during that impromptu swim of his, but Alexei used a condom each time he fucked me afterward. And there were a lot of times. Four? Five? I honestly lost track.

I wanted to ask what's changed. As we lay there last night, drunk with pleasure, our sweaty bodies tangled together, I had the opportunity. But I didn't dare bring up this topic lest whatever switch flipped in him were to flip back. I didn't dare speak at all, so instead, I drowsed in his arms, letting myself drift in that dreamy twilight between sleep and awareness, until he hardened for the umpteenth time and the madness began all over again.

I'm alone in the cabin, so I take my time getting up. I feel lazy, like the aforementioned cat. And sleepy, even though I caught a decent amount of shut-eye in-between all the sex. Even the thought of getting my hands on a computer doesn't motivate me to move any faster this morning, though I do finally get myself out of bed by picturing in great detail the next boss I'm going to design.

Yawning, I stumble to the bathroom and take a long, hot shower, hoping it wakes me up. It doesn't. I don't even feel like blow-drying my hair or putting on my makeup, but I force myself to do it anyway, so I don't feel the way I did yesterday, when I thought the sight of my naked body turned Alexei off. It didn't, clearly, but some stupid, vain part of me is still afraid it might happen one day. I feel sick just thinking about that possibility. Or... maybe I just feel sick.

Come to think of it, my head is woolly in that cold/flu sort of way, and I'm again a tiny bit nauseated.

Could I be coming down with something?

I swallow exaggeratedly.

Nope, no sore throat.

My nose isn't running either.

And I don't think I'm getting one of my headaches.

Everything inside me goes cold.

No. No, no, no.

Frantically, I count the days I've been here—and exhale in relief.

Even if I were pregnant, I wouldn't be having symptoms so early on. The first time Alexei and I had sex was four days ago. I'm no ob-gyn, but I'm pretty sure women start getting

symptoms way later than that. Like weeks or months later. This is way too soon.

My head begins to throb, and for the first time ever, I welcome the sensation. That's what my strange malaise must be about: an impending headache. Not pregnancy. It can't be pregnancy.

We're using condoms now, for fuck's sake.

Breakfast. That's what I need, even if my stomach disagrees at the moment. I need to eat before the headache gets any worse, and then I'll request another encounter with Vika's magic needles.

I'm not pregnant. I refuse to be.

ALEXEI CATCHES ME IN THE HALLWAY JUST AS I STEP OUT OF the cabin. Underneath his tattooed, muscular arm is a laptop—a big, chunky one, the kind that has serious power.

Budding headache or not, I practically salivate at the sight.

“Is that for me?” I ask breathlessly, not taking my eyes off the prize.

“Loaded with all the software and tools you'll need,” Alexei replies, sounding amused, and hands it to me.

I grab it eagerly. It's heavy, like a proper gaming computer should be. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

There's a genuine smile on Alexei's lips and a warm glow in his dark gaze. “You're quite welcome, Alinyonok. Let me know if there's anything else you need.”

Freedom. The last decade of my life back. To have never met you. The cutting replies pop into my mind but don't leave my lips. For once, I'm not inclined to take potshots at him, and it's not because of all the orgasms my body vividly remembers.

It feels like something has changed between us. Something ineffable yet vital.

"I could use another session with Vika," I say, tucking the computer under my arm. "It really helped the last time."

Alexei's smile vanishes. "You have another headache?"

"The start of one, I think."

It feels a little different, this one, but I don't tell him that. Nor do I mention the fact that I'm suddenly feeling dizzy.

Not pregnancy. Please don't let me be pregnant.

"All right." He takes the laptop from me and shepherds me back into the cabin, where he places the laptop on a chair. "Go back to bed. I'll have Vika come with breakfast and her acupuncture kit."

I'm tempted to argue—I'm all dressed and sunblocked—but my dizziness is intensifying, and black dots are dancing at the corners of my vision. I need to lie down, now, before I have another embarrassing fainting episode.

As if sensing the urgency, Alexei swiftly guides me to the bed and helps me stretch out. I close my eyes the moment my head touches the pillow and take small, shallow breaths as the room spins around me, making my nausea worse.

It's like I've had too much to drink, only I haven't touched a drop.

Alexei brushes his hand over my forehead, his callused palm cool and dry, and then I hear his footsteps and the sound of a door opening and closing.

I lie still, not moving a muscle as the room continues to spin like I've just gotten off a carousel. What the fuck is going on with me? I swallow as saliva pools in my mouth, and then I swallow again. It doesn't help.

Fuck. I'm going to throw up.

I bolt to the bathroom and make it to the toilet just in time.

As soon as my stomach is completely empty, I feel better. Shaky, still a bit dizzy, and more than a little disgusted with myself, but at least the nausea has eased. My legs are like buttered noodles, but I manage to stand and walk to the sink, where I brush my teeth twice and gargle with mouthwash three times. Then I fix my face and hair and stumble back to the bed, where I lie down and close my eyes, not wanting to acknowledge what's quickly becoming undeniable.

Too early for symptoms or not, I'm more than likely pregnant.

CHAPTER 23

ALEXEI

Alina is pale and unmoving on the bed when I return to the cabin with Vika in tow. My chest tightens further, the worry like a raging beast inside me. Two headaches in as many days, plus a fainting spell during our wedding—is she getting worse? Should I bring her to a hospital instead of relying on the team of doctors that the sub is bringing at my directive? Even with the sub’s extraordinary speed, they’re still some three days out. Then again, we’re a good four days’ sail away from any place with a decent hospital, so they’re still the fastest way to get her medical attention.

A thought crosses my mind, one as improbable as it is now terrifying. I dismiss it immediately. I doubt I’ve gotten her pregnant so quickly, and in any case, it’s only been a couple of days. I don’t know as much as I should about human reproduction, but I’m certain it takes a while for the hormones to have any effect on how a woman feels. Unless... I pull out my phone as Vika goes to work, placing needles all over Alina’s face and body.

A quick search reveals that I’m right. According to every reputable medical source, pregnancy symptoms don’t show up so early. Except... I scroll through one Reddit thread after another, and there are women swearing up and down the

internet that they knew they were pregnant from day one. Their breasts changed, or they started feeling tired or nauseated. Or got cravings. Or felt lightheaded. Or started getting headaches...

Fuck. She could be pregnant.

I fight the urge to throw my phone at the wall.

I know this is my doing—this is exactly what I wanted to accomplish—but that was before. Now, the mere possibility makes me want to cut my dick off. As irrational as it is, after that dream, I'm convinced that if she were to have my baby, she would die—and I'd rather risk losing her to the Molotovs a thousand times over.

“All done,” Vika says softly, turning away from the bed to face me. “I'll come back in a half hour with breakfast, okay?”

I nod curtly, already hurrying over to the bed. As the door closes behind Vika, I sit on the edge of the mattress and take Alina's hand in mine, being careful not to dislodge the needles in her wrist and elbow. Her palm is small in mine, even though her fingers are long and slender. Her oval-shaped nails are painted a glossy red. I stroke the middle of her palm with my thumb, marveling at its softness and fragility. What the fuck was I thinking, wanting to impregnate her? To subject her to the most painful, most dangerous experience a woman can go through? What is any man thinking, doing that to his woman? I've spent the morning reading up on the million things that can go wrong during pregnancy and childbirth, and I'm frankly amazed that humankind is still in existence.

For a woman, having unprotected sex is like entering a war zone, with a not-insignificant chance of death, organ damage, and PTSD.

“How are you feeling?” I ask quietly as Alina’s lashes sweep up, revealing her gem-like eyes. “Any improvement so far? Do you want me to get the migraine pills as well?”

“Some, and no,” she murmurs, closing her eyes again. “Keep doing that.”

Keep doing what? The needles? Does she need more of them? I’m about to call Vika back in when I realize Alina is talking about my thumb rubbing circles on her palm. My pulse speeds up, and warmth invades my chest. It’s the first time she’s ever asked for my touch. She probably doesn’t even realize she’s done it, but I do, and it makes all the difference in the world.

Leaning down, I reverently kiss her soft palm, and then I continue stroking it as she asked. Slowly, the tension in her face eases, and I’m able to take a full breath as my ribcage expands in relief.

I need her to be well. I need it more than anything.

It seems like no time at all passes before Vika returns with a tray of food. By then, some color has returned to Alina’s cheeks. As Vika removes the needles, I drizzle honey over a bowl of buckwheat and top it with berries, the way I’ve seen Alina do for herself. On the tray are also eggs, toast, and all kinds of breakfast meats and seafood, but I suspect my Alinyonok won’t be up for anything that ambitious.

Sure enough, once Vika leaves, Alina wrinkles her nose and says, “I’m not sure I can eat right now. I’m not hungry.”

“How about just a few bites?” I coax, stuffing some pillows behind her to prop her up to a half-sitting position. “Just something to stabilize your blood sugar.”

She sighs. “Okay.”

She reaches for the bowl, but I'm already holding out a spoon of buckwheat and honey-drenched berries. She hesitates for a bit, then lets me bring the spoon to her mouth. I smile, satisfied on some primal level as I watch her chew and swallow the food I've given her, and then I scoop up another spoonful and feed it to her. Obediently, she accepts my offering, and blood surges to my dick as I watch her red lips close around the spoon.

Fuck. This isn't supposed to be erotic.

I try to chase away all thoughts of what I'd like those plush lips to close around next, but I'm not entirely successful. Everything Alina does—including sleeping and breathing—turns me on. It's been that way from the moment I saw her, and it's only getting worse. I can't get enough of her.

Each touch, each kiss only feeds my addiction.

She's such a good girl too, eating one spoonful after another, and I tell her that, my voice huskier than it should be. She doesn't seem to mind. If anything, her lids are at half-mast as she looks at me from underneath her long, thick lashes, her chest moving in a quick, shallow rhythm. Before long, the bowl of buckwheat is empty, and I'm so hard my dick could drill through the ocean floor.

"How is your headache?" I ask, my voice hoarse with the desire she evokes in me.

I have no intention of taking her again. I just need to know that she's okay and—

"It's better," she whispers, her eyes like endless pools of jade, dark and liquid and mysterious. She leans toward me ever so slightly, her lips parted, and before I can rein myself in, I reach for her, pulling her toward me, angling her face

until our mouths meet. I try to stop, but I taste the honey and berries on her breath, and I deepen the kiss, desperate for more of that sweetness, more of her.

And she gives me more. Wrapping her arms around my neck, she pulls me down until I'm on top of her, pressing her into the mattress. Holding on tight, she kisses me back, arching against me, and I lose the fight against the lust riding me.

I take her like the animal I am, and the only thing I remember to do last minute is get a condom.

Never again will I endanger her life and health.

CHAPTER 24

ALINA

I close my eyes and lay my head on Alexei's chest, listening to the steady thumping of his heart as a pleasant drowsiness sweeps over me in the aftermath of the sensory storm that's just torn me apart. My headache is all but gone, and the hypnotic way Alexei is gently running his fingers through my hair makes me disinclined to move a muscle.

He used a condom. Again.

I don't understand it, but I can't say I'm not grateful. Which is stupid and may signify the beginnings of Stockholm syndrome because gratitude is not what I should be feeling toward a man who kidnapped me, forced me into marriage, and more than likely has already made me pregnant.

I wait for the panic to crash over me, but it doesn't. Maybe it's all the endorphins from the sex or the fact that there's nothing I can do if the worst has happened, but I feel strangely calm about the possibility of pregnancy. Numb from shock, maybe? It doesn't feel like it, but then again, I can't trust my emotions around Alexei. His mere presence messes up my inner compass. Like a powerful magnet, he scrambles my sense of right and wrong, good and bad... love and hate.

No. Not that last bit. I still hate Alexei Leonov. That's the one thing I'm sure of. So what if we're lying here like lovers? We're not. We're stalker and victim, captor and captive, husband and unwilling wife. And the worst part is, I still don't know why.

Why me? Why has he gone to all this trouble to have me?

Opening my eyes, I trace the groove of his ab muscle with my finger. "So is it just because of the way I look? Or because I'm pretty *and* a Molotov?" I don't lift my head as I ask the question.

A part of me is afraid I already know the answer.

He chuckles, the sound a soft, deep rumble under my ear. "You're not going to drop this, are you?" At my silence, he sighs. "It's not because you're a Molotov. That's actually a strike against you. I'd much rather not deal with your family, believe me."

I do believe him. The Leonovs are rich and powerful enough not to need our resources or connections, which is why this betrothal never made sense to me. "So... you just like the way I look."

He moves his palm to the base of my neck and squeezes gently, massaging away any gathering tension. "Alinyonok..." His tone is wry. "You know that I didn't exactly lack for female companionship before I met you, right? Some people might even consider the women I spent time with to be as beautiful as you."

Something green and swamp-like stirs within me. "I... Yes. I know that."

He's silent for a beat. Then he asks quietly, "Do you remember the day we met?"

“Of course I do.” That evening eleven years ago is etched in my mind as clearly as if it had taken place yesterday.

“What did you think when you first saw me?” He shifts me off of him and positions me so I’m lying on my side, facing him. His eyes gleam like black diamonds as he waits for my answer. “When we ran into each other in that hallway, what did you think of me?”

I’m tempted to lie, but what would be the point? It’s hard to deny my attraction to him after I’ve just combusted in his arms. I clear my throat, fighting the urge to look away from his piercing stare. “I thought you were dangerous... and hot. But mostly dangerous.”

If he’s amused by my answer, he doesn’t show it. His expression doesn’t change as he asks, “Do you want to know what I thought of you?”

“Let me guess... You thought I was pretty.”

“Beautiful,” he corrects. “And yes, I thought that—until you started talking.” I draw back, insulted, but he continues. “That’s when I learned that you were also clever and fearless.” His lips twitch in a ghost of a smile. “‘Are they dangling *you*,’ indeed.”

“I remember that,” I say bemusedly.

When he learned who I was, he thought I was underaged bait, a trap set out for him. Which, in a way, is what I was—I just wasn’t there specifically for *him*. My parents liked to dangle me in front of everyone, to dress me up and parade me like a show pony.

Alexei pushes up onto his elbow. “I’m glad,” he says softly, his eyes never leaving mine. “Because I haven’t forgotten a single moment of that encounter. Even before I left

your parents' penthouse that evening, I knew I'd have trouble forgetting you. I just didn't know how much trouble. You were like a comet streaking through the sky—so bright and rare you took my breath away.”

My spine tingles at the intensity in his gaze even as I try to make light of his words. “I guess the bait worked then, huh?”

“Too well,” he confirms. “You were all I could think about for weeks. Then months. Finally, I knew I had to see you again—if only to prove to myself that you were nothing like how I'd built you up in my mind. You were barely fourteen, for fuck's sake. I had no business thinking of you, much less wanting you.” His lips twist in self-derision. “I figured they'd glossed you up for the party, made you look like the adult you weren't, so if I ran into you on a regular day, I'd see that you were nothing special and finally rid myself of this obsession. I told myself there was no way you could be as mesmerizing as I remembered... as smart and brave. But you were.”

I stare at him, my heart beating unevenly. I don't know how to feel about what he's saying because I also remember our next encounter—and the fallout from it. “Are you saying it wasn't an accident that you walked in on me with Dan in the library? That you came there looking for me?”

Alexei's gaze is unblinking. “Yes. I got my father to invite us to your parents' place, and when your mother mentioned that you were in the middle of an English lesson, I excused myself to answer some emails on my laptop and went searching for you. And I found you... with *him*.”

My stomach tightens, and I turn onto my back to stare up at the ceiling. “So you killed him. An innocent man who'd merely brushed some lint off my face. And then you decided

to arrange our betrothal—even though I was still only fourteen.”

I say this out loud to remind myself as well as him that no matter what he says about me, no matter how he treats me now, ours isn't some sweet courtship. He's done terrible things in the name of his obsession with me, and I have no doubt he'll do more in the future.

My tutor was a creep, but he didn't deserve to disappear at Alexei's hands.

Alexei moves to lean over me. His eyes are pitch black, his voice low and dangerously even. “Do you honestly believe he would've stopped with lint? He wanted you. I could see it on his fucking face.”

I swallow, staring up at his dark features. “So did you, by your own admission. How is that different?”

“I didn't fucking act on it, that's how.” He takes a deep breath and rolls over onto his back next to me. His voice is tight as he says, “I wanted to. Believe me, I wanted to. When I saw you in the library that day, barefaced and dressed in sweats, you looked your age—yet I still wanted you. You were still the most radiant thing I'd ever seen, and the thought that he dared to lust after you, to touch you... that any boy, any man who laid eyes on you would want you just as much as I did...” His chest rises in another deep inhale. “I couldn't fucking take it. And there you were, telling me off, so haughty and brave with your little chin up in the air...” He turns to face me again, his eyes glittering. “I knew then that I had to have you. That I'd do whatever it took to make you mine.”

“Because other men might want me?” I ask incredulously, sitting up.

He sits up too. “Because I’d have to kill them if they acted on that want.”

His tone is even, his gaze unwavering. It’s like he thinks he’s done the world a favor by claiming me and thus sparing all those innocent lives. Except he didn’t spare them all, not even close. There was Josh, who disappeared after dancing with me in high school, and the poor guy whose name I don’t remember who fell off a roof after kissing me. And Jorge in Bali whose scooter went over a cliff after I made out with him.

For all I know, there were more—men who looked at me, men who smiled at me, men who passed me on the street. They could’ve vanished for their sins, and I’ll never know that their blood is also on my hands.

My nausea returns, along with a throbbing in my temples. I can’t believe that just moments earlier, I felt grateful to him for belatedly using a condom. That I wanted him to like me for more than just my looks—as if the reason for his lethal obsession makes any difference when it’s wrought so much damage.

I turn away and rummage through the blanket until I find the dress I was wearing before things took a turn. Ignoring the heat in Alexei’s gaze, I pull it on and hurry to the bathroom, where I take yet another shower in a futile effort to erase the memory of the dark pleasure I’ve experienced at the hands of the psychopath who’s now my husband.

When I emerge, I half-expect him to be waiting there, ready to go again, but he’s absent. Instead, the laptop he’s given me is lying on top of the perfectly made bed. Did he have Vika or Larson come in here and clean up, or did he do that himself? Either way, I eagerly grab the computer and sprawl out on my stomach as I flip it open.

It's beautiful—as powerful as it looks and loaded with all the software Alexei promised, as well as the work-in-progress that is my game.

Ignoring the headache and the nausea plaguing me, I dive in, and by the time I've implemented my idea for the next boss, I'm almost grateful to Alexei again... if only for providing me with a way to temporarily forget him and the reality he's forced on me.

CHAPTER 25

ALINA

Three days pass. At least I think it's three days. It could be two or four. The days and nights blur together because my sleep is so irregular. Alexei's sexual demands keep me up a good portion of the night, so I take long naps, and half the time when I wake up, I'm not sure if it's morning or evening. When Alexei isn't fucking my brains out, I'm on the computer, working on my game. I'm obsessed, utterly absorbed in it. The code, the story coming to life on the screen in front of me—it consumes me, just like *he* consumes me, although in an entirely different way.

I'm also increasingly sick. I hide it from Alexei, but I don't know how long I'll be able to keep it up. I throw up at least once a day, and my headaches never entirely go away, no matter how many needles Vika sticks in me. The dizzy spells are the worst, though, because they come upon me so suddenly. I could be showering, or eating, or simply working on my computer, and the next thing I know, I feel like I've just stepped off the world's fastest carousel. Thankfully, thus far, I've been alone when the worst of the spells have hit, so I don't think Alexei has noticed. At least I hope he hasn't.

I'm not sure why I'm hiding this from him. Maybe it's because I don't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing he got me pregnant—even though he seems to have changed

his mind about wanting it, given his religious use of condoms in recent days. Or maybe I'm still in denial, still hoping that I've simply caught the flu, and telling him about it means finding out for sure. Given his former plans for me, he has to have stashed a pack of pregnancy tests somewhere on the yacht, and I don't want to see those pink lines. Right now, I still have hope. I can still pretend that this sickness is something else, something infinitely less life-changing. Just in case, though, I haven't taken any of the migraine pills, nor have I had so much as a sip of alcohol. It's irrational, but even though I don't want this baby, I couldn't live with myself if I caused him or her any harm. I even wonder if I should start taking some vitamins. Pregnant women need those, don't they? My diet has always been pretty healthy, with plenty of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains, but with the nausea tormenting me all day, my appetite has been really off, and it's all I can do to choke down enough food at mealtimes so Alexei won't notice. I could very well be developing a deficiency of some kind, and if there's a baby...

Dammit. I wish I hadn't thought of that. I set my laptop onto the other lounge chair and lay my hand on my stomach—which feels flatter than usual, almost concave. Have I lost some weight? That can't be good for the baby. Maybe I *should* tell Alexei, so he gets me those vitamins. But if I do—

“How's the game coming along?”

I jump at the sound of Ruslan's voice and turn my head to peer into the bright sun silhouetting his tall, broad-shouldered figure. I haven't seen Alexei's brother much in the past few days. He hasn't been joining us for meals, and I've been working on my game in the cabin, where I can be close to the bathroom in case I need to throw up. However, the weather is cooler this morning, and I was hoping the fresh air would quell

the nausea, so I decided to code under the overhang while Alexei enjoys a morning swim. He invited me to swim with him, but I declined, not wanting to chance a dizzy spell in the water. Besides, the less time Alexei and I spend together outside of the bedroom, the better.

Without constant reminders of my husband's villainy, it's all too easy to fall under his spell, to start believing in his vision of our future instead of what I know is the far more likely outcome for us: a terrible marriage like that of my parents, where initial obsession masquerading as love swiftly devolves into something far darker and deadlier.

Not that Alexei has said he loves me.

Probably because he doesn't.

"I'm making good progress," I answer, reaching over to pick up my computer as Ruslan steps under the overhang, dressed in nothing but a pair of swimming shorts and mirrored aviators. "I have nothing else to do, so that helps."

Ruslan sprawls on the lounge where the laptop was sitting and laces his fingers behind his head. A mocking half-smile is on his lips when he turns his face toward me. "Why not spend some time with your new husband? It's your honeymoon, after all."

"Is it now?" My tone is sugary sweet. "How kind of you to enlighten me."

Ruslan's smile widens to a humorless grin. "Still hate him, huh? I told him this was a bad idea."

"The attack on Nikolai's compound or forcing me into marriage?"

Ruslan's grin fades. Sighing, he turns his head to look straight ahead, and I open my computer. I'm about to dive

back into my game when he speaks again. “Did Lyosha ever tell you about our childhood? Those first few years after our mother’s death?”

My hands freeze on the keyboard. I shouldn’t bite, but I can’t help it. The bait is too juicy. “Afraid not,” I say, matching his conversational tone.

Ruslan turns toward me again, and I catch my distorted reflection in his mirrored shades. “You don’t know the man you married at all, do you?”

“The man I was forced to marry, you mean.”

Ruslan’s expression doesn’t change. “You should get to know him. However it all started for you two, you’re going to spend a lifetime together.”

I look away. I don’t want to think about that, about the years and the decades ahead of us. About the children who will tie us together, binding me to Alexei until I’m nothing more than an extension of him.

About the tiny clump of cells that may already be growing inside me, sealing my fate.

I swallow against a sudden swell of nausea. Ruslan is right. I should get to know my husband, if only so I’m not parenting a child with a terrifying stranger.

Also, I’m curious as fuck, and Alexei’s brother seems willing to talk.

I decide to start with something small and innocuous. “Has your family always called him Lyosha?” I ask, glancing back at Ruslan.

Alyosha is the commonly used short version of Alexei. That’s what I, as his wife, would call him at home if I could

ever bring myself to be that informal. *Lyosha* is even more casual. It brings to mind a village boy running wild and climbing trees with skinned knees and too-short pants.

Is that what Alexei was like as a child? It's hard to picture. By the time I met him, he was already almost a man... already dangerous and magnetic.

"Our father always called him Alexei," Ruslan answers. "But Mama called him Lyosha, and so did Ksenia and I."

Ksenia. Slava's mom. The sister they lost. My heart squeezes in my chest, and my nausea intensifies. I swallow again and speak swiftly to distract myself from the unpleasant sensation. "Were the three of you close growing up?"

"Very, but not in a typical way," Ruslan replies. "After our mother died, Lyosha took care of us. Even though he's only two years older than I, he took on the role of a second parent to me and Ksenia." Ruslan smiles, and for the first time, there's something boyish and genuine in the curve of his lips. "He'd feed us chicken soup whenever we were sick, even though we had a nanny who could do that. He'd tell us stories about our mother and show us pictures. And every night, after our nanny would go to sleep, I'd climb into his bed, and he'd read to me the way our mother used to. When Ksenia was old enough, she'd climb in too. We'd huddle around him as he read our favorite books to us, and then he'd tuck us in for the night. He did that until I was twelve and Ksenia was nine."

I'm so fascinated I forget about the roiling in my stomach. Strangely, it's all too easy to picture Alexei in the role of a caretaker—maybe because I've already witnessed that side of him. "Why did he stop?" I ask.

Ruslan shrugs, his smile fading. "I decided I was too old for bedtime stories, and Ksenia didn't want to feel like a baby,

so she declared she was also too old. Lyosha acted like he was relieved, but in hindsight, I think he was hurt. It was for the best, though, because not long after that, our father sent the two of us to a military school in Novosibirsk, and Ksenia stayed behind.”

“Alone with your father?” I ask softly.

Ruslan’s expression changes. It’s a subtle change, one I wouldn’t have noticed if I hadn’t been staring straight at him, but as is, I catch the slight tensing of his jaw and the thinning of his mouth. “Yes,” he says evenly. “With our father.”

I’m dying to probe further in that direction, but I can sense those questions won’t be welcome. So I return to the topic Ruslan *is* willing to talk about. “You and Alexei seem to have more of a typical sibling relationship now,” I say, thinking back to all the times I’ve seen them interact. “Did that just happen to come about as the two of you grew up?”

“More or less,” Ruslan says, the tension leaving his features. “Being away at school was the real catalyst. When we first got there, Alexei acted as my protector, but I wanted to prove to the other kids that I didn’t need my big brother to intercede for me, so, being a dumb, easily embarrassed preteen, I kept picking fights with him and pushing him away.” He sighs and looks straight ahead. “For a couple of years in my early teens, we barely even talked. Then I realized what a little asshole I was being, and we reconnected again—this time, as brothers of a similar age, with all that it entails.” He glances at me. “What about you? With you being the youngest, did your brothers watch over you?”

I nod. “They still watch over me.”

In fact, they’re probably turning over every rock and clump of dirt to find me as we speak, but I don’t say that. With

all their spies and hackers, my captors know better than I do what my brothers are up to.

Ruslan must take my words for the warning that they are because he sighs again and removes his aviators. Turning his storm-gray eyes on me, he says quietly, “Alina, listen... I know you think this whole situation is fucked up, and I don’t blame you. The way my brother went about marrying you is... unusual, to say the least. But he will be a good husband to you. And a good father to your kids. Believe me, I know.”

I snort and look away. I understand Ruslan’s agenda now, why he decided to talk to me and paint this heartwarming picture of their childhood. Alexei the caretaker, Alexei the protector—I’m supposed to just buy into the fairy tale. Except I grew up in a family like theirs, and I know the truth: if this were a fairy tale, Alexei wouldn’t be my knight in shining armor.

He has too much dragon in him.

“Let me guess,” I say, turning back to arch my eyebrows at Ruslan. “Alexei is the one who’ll watch over me now, right? Protect me the way my brothers always have?”

Ruslan’s gaze is steady. “He will. He’s good at that.”

“Good at what?”

My pulse spikes at the sound of Alexei’s deep voice, and I turn to see him standing in the sun a few feet away, his tall, powerful body glistening with water from his swim. I inhale sharply. Even though we had sex this morning—twice—and I’m feeling increasingly queasy, my insides clench and my bikini bottoms turn embarrassingly damp.

“Being an asshole, obviously,” Ruslan replies, a mocking grin springing to his lips as he puts his sunglasses back on. “I

was just entertaining your bride with stories of our illustrious childhood. Seeing as you abandoned her and all...”

Alexei’s dark eyes narrow. “Why don’t you go entertain yourself? *Elsewhere*.” His voice is low and dangerous, making me realize that he’s jealous of his brother again.

Ruslan’s grin widens. “Gladly.” He rises to his feet with sleek grace. “I’ll leave you two to it.”

He saunters away, and I keep my eyes off his muscular back—both because I’m not the least bit interested and because I no longer feel like provoking Alexei’s jealousy. Though Ruslan’s story hasn’t made me magically fall in love with his brother, it has made me regret any tension I might’ve added to their relationship.

I don’t want to come between them, not even to notch some kind of dubious win in this peculiar war between me and Alexei. Not that it has felt as much like a war in the past couple of days. Just as the morning sickness weakens my body, Alexei’s inexhaustible attentiveness weakens my resolve to hate him. He’s never *not* focused on me—and it’s as flattering as it is unsettling.

As the youngest of four children, albeit the only girl, I’m used to being an afterthought. None of my childhood milestones were special to my parents because they’d already been through it three times. Just about anything I achieved—learning to read at four, acing my math class, climbing the tallest tree in the yard—one of my brothers had already done it and better. I couldn’t even compete in the looks department because my brothers were also pretty kids thanks to their signature Molotov features, and Mama got plenty of compliments on their behalf. It wasn’t until I entered puberty that she started taking more of an interest in me, since she

couldn't do designer gowns, hair, and makeup with her sons, but by then, I was used to being left to my own devices—my toys, my books, and especially, my video games.

It's different with Alexei. I get the feeling that I'm the center of his world. At the very least, if he's to be believed, I'm the only woman he's wanted in the past eleven years. A part of me still finds that hard to fathom, but I see no reason for him to lie. His actions, awful as they are, speak for themselves.

Even now, he's glaring at Ruslan as the latter dives overboard for a swim of his own.

Saliva floods my mouth as my queasiness abruptly intensifies.

Shit.

I push up to my feet and sway a little. Fucking dizziness. I do my best to hide it, but I'm not sure I succeed. Alexei's gaze swings to me, like a sniper's laser homing in on its target, and his eyes narrow.

Double shit.

"I need the bathroom," I say, aiming for a normal tone, but even I can hear the strain in my voice. My head throbs and a cold sweat covers my skin as I lurch toward the stairs, only to realize that there's no way I'm going to make it. Shakily, I change direction, heading for the starboard, but I don't make it there either.

Alexei's strong arms close around me from the back as I start to fall onto all fours, and I puke onto the wooden floor, missing his feet by centimeters.

For the first few moments, I'm too sick to be embarrassed. This has been the worst episode thus far. My esophagus burns

from the acid, my skin is clammy all over, and I'm so dizzy that if he weren't holding me, I'd collapse onto the soiled floor. But he is holding me, murmuring soothing endearments, seemingly oblivious to the grossness of what's happened, and as he turns me around and lifts me against his naked chest in a bridal hold, I feel small and helpless... and cared for.

The embarrassment hits me then, a hot wave of it washing over me, but he's already walking, carrying me down to the cabin. I bury my face in his shoulder, feeling the dampness of his skin, tasting the salt from his swim, and hot tears flood my eyes as the throbbing in my temples intensifies.

I am pregnant.

There's zero doubt in my mind.

And now he knows it too.

CHAPTER 26

ALEXEI

My ribcage feels like it's made of cement, my lungs unable to expand for a full breath as I carefully set Alina down on her feet in the bathroom and keep a hold on her from the back while she rinses out her mouth and brushes her teeth, avoiding my eyes in the mirror the entire time.

Fuck.

I've been suspecting it, fearing it for days now.

My plan succeeded all too well.

She's pregnant with my baby.

And I'm fucking terrified.

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" My voice is tight, angry-sounding, even though the only anger I'm feeling is at myself. This isn't the first time she's been sick, I'm sure of it. Several times over the past couple of days, I've returned to the cabin and found her on the bed, her skin the same pale-greenish shade it is now.

She's been throwing up and not telling me. Suffering and hiding it from me.

She spits out the toothpaste and finally meets my gaze in the mirror. There are dark streaks of mascara on her cheeks.

Tear streaks.

My gut clenches, and the cement cage around my lungs grows tighter as she replies in a small, hoarse voice, “I didn’t want you to know.”

Of course she didn’t. Why would she?

I did this to her.

I forced it on her.

And now she could die, just like my mother.

It takes everything I have to keep my expression unchanged and my tone even. “There is a submarine coming for Ruslan in a few hours. On it is a team of doctors with a small clinic’s worth of medical equipment. They’ll examine you, and then we’ll know for sure.”

Her eyes widen as I speak, and then I see it.

A spark of hope in her gaze.

She’s probably wondering if she can convince one of those doctors to help her get the word out to her brothers.

Normally, I would take a dark sort of pleasure in disabusing her of that hope, but all I can think about now is the fact that she’s already ill. That the baby, tiny as it is, is already hurting her, and it’s all my fault. So I stay quiet about the fact that the doctors are carefully vetted and extensively scanned, and that they understand the consequences for them and their families if the Molotovs were to catch wind of our location.

Her relentless desire to escape is of secondary importance to me now.

“Here,” I say after she washes her face, ridding it of the streaks of mascara along with all other makeup. “Let me take

you to bed. You need to rest.”

“No, wait, I need...” She reaches for the drawers with her makeup, and I gently pull her away.

“That can wait.”

Besides, I love her face like this, without anything to hide its natural beauty. Her pale skin has a pearly glow that her foundation normally hides, and her unpainted mouth looks soft and vulnerable, the curve of her upper lip beatifically sweet. Other women appear more down-to-earth and approachable without makeup, but not my Alinyonok. She looks ethereal, angelic... and infinitely more tempting.

Ignoring her protests, I pick her up and carry her out of the bathroom and to the bed, where I lay her down, remove her high-heeled sandals from her feet, and cover her with the blanket. She closes her eyes and takes small, shallow breaths, as if she's still nauseated.

Fucking fuck. I wonder if her head is hurting too.

Ignoring the tightness in my chest, I pull out my phone and message Vika to come with her needles. Then I sit on the edge of the bed, gently extract one of my wife's slender wrists from under the blanket, and begin massaging the inside of it with my thumb the way she likes.

I will fix this.

I will make it better.

I don't yet know how, but I will.

CHAPTER 27

ALINA

I'm waking up from a nap when I hear unfamiliar voices outside the cabin door. They're male and female, speaking a mixture of Russian and English with a variety of accents.

My pulse accelerates.

The doctors.

They're here.

Apparently having arrived by submarine.

I sit up and note with relief that the nausea and dizziness are gone. Vika's needles helped, along with whatever magic is in Alexei's touch.

In this fucked-up fairy tale of ours, he may be more of the evil wizard than the dragon, slowly but surely pulling me under his spell.

Well, fuck that. This is my chance.

Jumping off the bed, I hurry to the bathroom, where I quickly fix my face and generally make myself presentable. Just as I emerge, a knock sounds on the cabin door.

"Come in," I call out, smoothing my palms over my dress.

A whole team of people piles into the cabin—four men and one woman, plus Alexei. His face is dark and tense, his jaw set in a hard, dangerous line.

Is he that worried about me?

No. I refuse to entertain that possibility. Whatever underlies his decade-long obsession with me, I doubt it's anything resembling genuine love. If I were truly sick and not just pregnant, I doubt he'd want me. He certainly stayed away when I was unwell before.

The bitter thought catches me off guard. I wanted him to stay away, to leave me alone after my parents' deaths, didn't I? Each encounter with him set off the headaches and the bouts of depression, so I was grateful that he stalked me from afar instead of forcing himself into my life.

I don't resent him for staying away.

I can't.

That wouldn't make any sense.

Alexei begins introducing the newcomers, so I force myself to focus.

“—in Switzerland and is one of the top neurologists in Europe,” he's saying about a short, bespectacled man who's wearing a pair of gray linen pants and a white linen button-up shirt.

“A pleasure, Madame Leonov,” the Swiss neurologist, whose name I missed, says in French-accented English. “It is wonderful to meet you.”

I give him my most charming smile, even as I wince inside at the “Madame Leonov” bit. “The pleasure is all mine.”

“And this is Dr. Elizaveta Sergeyevna Bureva,” Alexei continues, nodding toward the only woman, a middle-aged blonde wearing a short-sleeved navy dress. “She’s one of the top ob-gyns in St. Petersburg.”

My pulse skips a beat at the “ob” part. “It’s great to meet you,” I say, switching to Russian.

Bureva nods politely and replies in Russian-accented English, “Likewise, Alina Vladimirovna.”

As the introductions continue, I learn that the other two men—Dr. Rousseau, a gastroenterologist, and Dr. Whitman, a hematologist—are from London, where each has his own clinic. I have no idea how Alexei managed to assemble such a world-class team on what must’ve been short notice, or what kind of submarine brought them here, but the more the merrier, as far as I’m concerned.

If nothing else, one of these people is bound to make a mistake that will somehow clue my brothers in to my location. It might be something as innocuous as a note in the cloud about me or a bank transfer into one of their accounts from the Leonovs—Konstantin probably has his hackers scanning the net, looking for that sort of thing.

I picture it, my brothers coming for me, and my stomach tightens as the nausea returns, along with a low-grade throbbing in my temples.

Dammit. I can’t even enjoy fantasizing about an escape.

With effort, I refocus on the conversation.

“—permission, we’d like to take some blood, run a few tests, and do a full-body MRI, focusing on the brain,” the neurologist is saying to me.

I blink. “You brought an MRI machine? Aren’t those huge, and don’t they require special rooms and whatnot?”

“Not this specific prototype,” he replies. “It’s actually a mobile unit that requires less power—not that that’s a concern here.” He glances admiringly at Alexei.

I frown in confusion. “It’s not?” Aren’t we on a boat in the middle of the ocean?

“The submarine is nuclear powered,” Alexei explains as casually as if we were talking about how a cake is made. “It’s another use for our portable reactors.”

If Nikolai or Valery were here, they’d want to know all about this. Atomprom, one of the companies owned by the Leonovs, is the primary rival to my brothers’ nuclear venture. Then again, maybe they already know all about it and are working on a similar use case for our portable nuclear reactors. Either way, I have other things to worry about right now, like the fact that I’m starting to feel dizzy again.

Hoping to hide it, I sit down as unobtrusively as possible.

Not unobtrusively enough, apparently. Alexei’s gaze snaps to me, and his eyes narrow. “You’re ill again?”

I guess there’s no point in hiding it now. After all, these doctors are presumably here for me. “A little bit,” I say and take a deep breath as the throbbing in my temples begins anew. “I think it’s another headache, maybe.”

The doctors already have their notepads out.

“Can you please describe your symptoms for us, Mrs. Leonov?” Rousseau asks.

I inhale and exhale slowly. “Nausea, vomiting, occasional dizziness. I fainted once or twice. Headaches and migraines,

but I've had those forever, so—”

“How long?” the neurologist, whose name I really should learn, interrupts. “When did each symptom start?”

“The headaches I've had since my late teens. They got worse when... well, there was some family trouble when I was nineteen.” I swallow, pushing the memories away. “The nausea and dizziness, that's only been an issue in the past week or so.”

Since Alexei got me pregnant, I want to add, but I don't because it's their job to determine that. I don't know why this requires a whole team of specialists instead of one ob-gyn, or even just a basic drugstore pregnancy test.

It's not like I'm actually sick.

“So you haven't felt dizzy or nauseated before?” the neurologist presses. “Perhaps during the migraines?”

“Oh. Well, yes, I do usually get nauseated during particularly bad episodes. And dizzy...” I think back. “Yeah, I guess sometimes.”

The painkillers I take knock me out most of the time, and I definitely get dizzy from that.

“Do you have any other gastrointestinal symptoms?” Rousseau asks as he jots down notes. “Upset stomach, diarrhea, anything along those lines?”

“Not really. I mean... maybe a little from the meds,” I admit.

Rousseau's head snaps up. “Which meds? What do you take?”

I sigh and list all the pills I've been prescribed over the years. As I go on, I can see the disapproving looks on the

doctors' faces.

“Painkillers are the only things that truly help me,” I say defensively when they're done scribbling their notes. “I'm not addicted, I swear.”

It's possible I've overused the pills at certain times in my life, but I've always been able to stop.

“She also smokes pot,” Alexei says, and I shoot him a dark stare as the doctors scribble on their notepads some more.

“When was your last menstrual period?” Bureva asks, her pen at the ready. “Any chance you could be pregnant?”

Finally, we're getting somewhere. “About three weeks ago, and yes, major chance.”

I throw Alexei another glare, but he's not looking at me. Instead, he's watching the ob-gyn, who is frowning for some reason as she takes her notes.

“What are your dizzy episodes like?” the neurologist asks. “Can you please describe one for me?”

I blow out a frustrated breath. “Why? I'm pregnant, okay? That's what this is. Just have me pee on a stick and get it over with.”

My tone is sharp, but I can't help it. My headache is worsening by the second, and I'm getting those black dots in the corners of my vision. If I don't lie down, I may pass out, and won't they have a field day then?

Bureva looks up from her notepad. “If your calculations are correct, it's unlikely that you're experiencing morning sickness, Alina Vladimirovna.” Her tone is even and slightly detached. “Since you haven't missed your period during this cycle, your HCG levels shouldn't be high enough to cause

such strong symptoms. But of course, there are always exceptions, and we will definitely test you for pregnancy. For now, can you please tell me how long your cycles are, and if they're regular?"

What is she saying? If it's not pregnancy, what could it possibly be?

I dampen my lips. My mouth is suddenly feeling dry. "About twenty-eight days, and yes, pretty regular."

"Again, can you please describe your dizzy episodes to me?" the neurologist asks. "I'm sorry to insist, but this is important. When you feel dizzy or faint, do you see any kind of flashing lights or dots?"

A strange chill permeates my stomach. "Dots, I guess."

"No flashes?" he persists.

"There were flashes from the camera. It was at the wedding. Alexei's brother was taking pictures and..." I shrug helplessly and cast a look at Alexei.

He's standing like a statue, staring at me, his jaw clenched so tightly I'm afraid he'll break his teeth. Is he angry? Upset? My stomach tightens, and I turn my attention back to the doctors, who are now conferring among themselves in low voices.

"Let us get the rest of your medical history, Mrs. Leonov, and then we'll run all the tests," Rousseau says.

I nod, swallowing against a wave of nausea, and do my best to answer all their questions. When they're done, Whitman takes my blood—a ridiculous amount, something like fifteen vials—and then Alexei carries me up to the deck, ignoring, as always, my insistence that I can walk. Ruslan,

Larson, and Vika are up there, all three of them standing by the rails and staring at something.

That something is the submarine. It's next to the yacht, the top of it sticking out of the water like a metallic shark's bulky fin. I have no idea how big it is under the water, but the part of it that's visible is at least the size of this yacht. I'm not sure what I was picturing, but it wasn't something this gigantic, for sure. Is it military grade? I suspect it is, and if so, I wonder which military the Leonovs got it from—or which military they're manufacturing it for.

With the Leonovs, one never knows what shady pies they have their fingers in.

There are a million questions buzzing in my mind, but there's no time to ask any of them because Alexei carries me to the starboard ladder and sets me on my feet before it.

“Do you think you can climb down there?” he asks, nodding at an inflatable raft bobbing in the water below. “If not, I'll strap you to me and carry you down on my back.”

“I can definitely climb,” I say, infusing my tone with all the confidence I can muster. “Seriously, I'm completely fine.”

He doesn't look like he believes me, but he says, “All right. I'll go down first, so I can catch you if anything. Ruslan, spot her on the first few rungs.”

Alexei's brother is already at my elbow. “On it,” he says without so much as a hint of his usual sarcasm. “I've got her, don't worry.”

I roll my eyes and grab the ladder. Last I checked, pregnancy—because I'm still convinced that's what this is—doesn't make you an invalid. Ignoring the nausea and the dancing black dots in my vision, I climb down, and Alexei's

strong arms catch me as soon as I'm within his reach. Then the raft takes us to the submarine, and it's another climbing operation—this time, into the depths of what has to be a huge underwater ship.

There's at least one long hallway, with a bunch of doors on either side, and behind one of those doors is a room with all kinds of medical equipment. Alexei carries me there—again, even though I can walk perfectly fine on my own and have told him so. The neurologist follows us in. I guess he's going to be the one operating the mobile MRI machine sitting in the middle of the room. The “mobile” part is debatable. The machine is huge, which makes sense given that this is about to be a full-body scan.

As I approach it, something occurs to me. “Wait,” I say, turning to the neurologist. “Is this safe for pregnancy? I don't want...” I swallow and look away from Alexei, who's eyeing me with a peculiar expression. “I don't want anything to harm the baby, if there's one.”

Which there is. I'm sure of it.

“Magnetic resonance is not harmful to the developing fetus,” the doctor says.

I take a deep breath. “Okay, then. Let's do it.”

Maybe once I get all these tests out of the way, I'll be able to sneak a note to the doctors to pass on to my brothers—or I'll come up with something even better while the MRI does its thing.

CHAPTER 28

ALINA

I haven't come up with anything better by the time the scan is done. In fact, I don't even know if I'll be able to write a note without Alexei seeing it. Since I don't have access to paper or writing implements, I'll have to borrow one of the doctors' pens and notepads—and I have no idea how I can do that subtly.

Of course, it's possible that I can't come up with anything good because of the raging headache plaguing me, a headache made infinitely worse by all the clanking, beeping, and pounding noises inside the machine. It was so bad I'm grateful I didn't throw up while I was in there. For a few minutes toward the end, it was touch and go. Still is, as a matter of fact.

I must look a little greenish when I'm rolled out of the machine because Alexei instantly picks me up and carries me through a door into what turns out to be a small bathroom. I'm getting so used to him carrying me around that I don't even bother to object. My legs are also feeling a little shaky, so there's that.

"Bureva wants your urine sample," he says, carefully setting me on my feet by the toilet, on top of which a sealed plastic cup is already waiting. "Do you think you can manage that, or do you need my help?"

Oh, God. Shoot me now. “Yes, I can manage. Now, please, let me be.”

Not only will I not pee in front of him, ever, but I need him to step out so I can throw up without dying of embarrassment.

Alexei gives me a measured stare. “I’ll be right outside. Call out if you need anything—and do not lock the door. I will break it down if I find it locked.”

I somehow manage an eyeroll. “Yes, Dr. Leonov. Now, please, go.”

He steps out, and I grip the edge of the sink. The nausea is subsiding a little. Maybe I won’t throw up. Just in case, I tie my hair into a knot while taking long, slow breaths. The latter doesn’t help much. The air here feels stale, probably because we’re underwater. Despite that, I provide the requested sample without vomiting, and by the time I’ve washed my hands, the nausea has subsided some more.

“It’s in there,” I tell Alexei when I step out. “Now, are there more tests?”

There are, of course. Bureva performs a pelvic exam and an ultrasound of my stomach. By the time all of this is done and Alexei brings me back to the yacht, I’m so exhausted I can’t work up any enthusiasm over my sophomoric plan to surreptitiously pass the doctors a note.

Who am I kidding here, anyway? Even if I were to succeed, they’d probably read it and give it to my husband.

So when the doctors pile into the cabin a few minutes later, I don’t bother trying anything. It takes all my strength to sit slumped against Alexei’s side, supported by his arm wrapped around me, and not beg for some painkillers for the migraine splitting my skull open.

My head hurts so bad that I don't notice at first how grave the doctors' faces are. Alexei does, though. His body turns to stone next to mine, and that's what clues me in that something is very wrong.

The neurologist—whose name I finally learned is Dr. Kressler—looks particularly grim. “Madame Leonov,” he says, his brows furrowed and his French accent more pronounced. “I'm afraid I have some bad news.” He takes a deep breath. “The MRI showed a mass on your frontal lobe.”

I stare at him, uncomprehending. “A mass?”

“A tumor,” he clarifies. “I can't give you a definitive diagnosis without a biopsy, but I suspect it may be a type of glioma—possibly an oligodendroglioma, a type of brain tumor that develops from glial cells called oligodendrocytes.”

A brain tumor. As in, cancer. In my brain.

Alexei's arm tightens around me, making it hard to breathe. Or maybe I just can't breathe because the words coming out of the doctor's mouth wrap around my throat like a fist. My mind is blank in a buzzing sort of way, as if my brain has been filled with static. Is that the tumor's doing? No, that wouldn't make sense. A minute ago, I could still think, even with the splitting headache. A tumor can't act that fast... can it?

Alexei's voice, harsh and tight, reaches me as if from a distance. “What can be done? Can you cure it?”

“There's no cure as such,” Kressler begins and turns pale—likely at whatever he sees on Alexei's face. Quickly, he amends, “But there is treatment, of course. The course of the treatment will depend on the exact diagnosis, including the grade of the tumor. All I can tell you for sure is that it will

involve surgery, during which we will remove as much of the tumor as possible and biopsy it. If it's a slow-growing—i.e. low-grade—tumor, that may be all that's required. But if it's anaplastic—high-grade and fast-growing—which I suspect it might be, given its appearance on the scans, radiation and chemotherapy will also be required.”

Surgery. Radiation. Chemotherapy.

Each word falls on my ears like the blow of an executioner's axe, hacking away at the buzzing static, breaking through the shock keeping me paralyzed in place.

“The prognosis...” Somehow, my voice is perfectly calm. “What is the life expectancy if it is a high-grade oligo-something? How long do I have?”

Kressler swallows visibly, his gaze to the right of me, presumably on Alexei's face. “Every case is individual, so I can't tell you for sure. There are so many factors that go into it—the age of the patient, the exact location of the tumor, whether there is a co-deletion of 1p/19q—”

“Your best guess then,” Alexei says, his tone so sharp that I nearly flinch—and everybody else in the room does flinch.

“A low-grade oligodendroglioma has a five-year survival rate of about seventy percent,” Kressler says after a tense moment. “For a high-grade oligodendroglioma, it's about thirty percent.”

So I have either two-in-three or one-in-three odds of making it to my thirtieth birthday. And to think that hours ago, my biggest health worry was my lack of prenatal vitamins.

I don't know whether to laugh or cry at a fate that seems determined to fuck with me.

“I guess I’m not pregnant then,” I say, rather dumbly. Because of course I am not. All the symptoms that I ascribed to early pregnancy are due to something far more malignant than Alexei’s baby.

I’m addressing Kressler, but it’s a female voice that replies in Russian-accented English.

“Actually, Alina Vladimirovna”—Bureva’s tone is still cool and detached, even as naked pity fills her gaze—“you are. While it’s too early for the HCG to be detectable in urine, a blood test is more sensitive. Your HCG levels are still quite low but in the range that indicates a developing pregnancy. If your estimate of your last period’s start date is correct, you are roughly three weeks along.”

CHAPTER 29

ALEXEI

When I was seven years old, I fell down a cellar in an old shack on my father's summer retreat in the Ural Mountains. I spent two nights there with a broken arm and a twisted ankle, feeling spiders and rats crawling over me, convinced that I would be eaten alive before I could be found.

Up until today, that was the most terrified I'd ever been.

And the most furious.

"Say that again." Even to my ears, my words sound like the snarl of a rabid wolf. "The part about the survival rate."

"Mr. Leonov..." Kressler's voice shakes a little. "I understand that you're upset. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, believe me, and besides, every case is so individual. For instance, age plays a factor, and your wife is quite young. Also, the frontal lobe location is a favorable clinical prognostic factor. So there's really—"

"I'm three weeks along?" Alina cuts in incredulously, staring at Bureva. She pushes my arm off of her and leaps to her feet. "How is that possible when I've only been here for a week?"

That's what she's concerned about? I want to grab and shake her. Or better yet, carry her off somewhere where I can keep her safe. Only there's no place that's safe. The danger is inside her, within her.

It's in her head.

I want to howl like the aforementioned wolf. I want to kill all the fucking doctors on this boat. Actually, no. I want to kill all the doctors who treated her throughout her life and didn't catch this thing. Because it had to have been there for a while given the headaches, right?

And she is pregnant.

Terror bites at me anew.

She's sick *and* pregnant.

"Pregnancy duration is counted from the date of your last period," Bureva answers, her professorial tone setting my teeth on edge. "So at the time of your ovulation, you're already considered to be two weeks pregnant, and by the time you've missed your period, you're about four weeks along."

Who the fuck cares about how they count pregnancy duration? I want to know what they're going to do to save Alina's life.

And the baby's.

No, I can't think about that.

I stand and advance on Kressler. "What are the next steps? Do you need to run more tests?"

He pales as I stop in front of him but rallies quickly. "Yes, definitely. The machines we brought aren't nearly as advanced as what we have back home. We also need to schedule your wife's surgery as soon as possible, so we have a better idea of

what we're dealing with." He throws a nervous glance at Alina before returning his attention to me. "It will be an awake brain surgery, where your wife will be roused from anesthesia once we've opened her skull. We'll be interacting with her as we perform the operation, so we can be sure we're not cutting into any healthy tissue."

They're going to open her skull.

And cut into her brain without anesthesia.

Is he fucking with me?

Kressler prudently backs away. "We'll do everything in our power to ensure that the patient is comfortable during the procedure. The brain has no pain receptors, so it's not nearly as bad as it sounds. Our top neurosurgeon will perform the operation, and he has an excellent track record when it comes to preserving healthy brain tissue."

My hands ball into fists. "Fuck his record. If he so much as harms a hair on her head—"

"What about the baby?" Alina interrupts, looking at Bureva. "Surgery, anesthesia—that can't be good for him or her, right?"

Fuck. I guess there's no choice but to think about that.

Bureva nods gravely. "You are correct, Alina Vladimirovna. The course of treatment Dr. Kressler outlined is incompatible with a healthy pregnancy. In fact..." She takes a breath. "If you do end up needing chemotherapy and radiation, you may want to freeze your eggs if given the chance. Otherwise, you may not be able to have children, ever."

And as Alina sways on her feet from this new blow, I push aside my own terror and grief and pull her into my embrace.

CHAPTER 30

ALINA

I'm either shell-shocked and not processing the events, or everything happens in the blink of an eye. Alexei carries me back to the submarine, with Ruslan accompanying us while barking orders to Larson and Vika, who stay behind on the yacht. The doctors follow us like a committee of grim-faced vultures, and as soon as the hatch door clanks shut above us, the engines of the massive underwater ship hum to life and my stomach pitches as I feel a downward motion.

It's a strange sensation, knowing that we're descending into the ocean's depths while I'm in Alexei's arms, being carried down the hallway. It's like he's Poseidon dragging me into the deep. Or Hades pulling me down into the underworld. Either way, I'm more than glad I'm not claustrophobic.

Under different circumstances, I'd be fascinated by our mode of transportation—Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas* was one of my favorite books growing up. Right now, though, my mind is not on the engineering marvel that is the submarine, nor on the incredible deep-water creatures that might be swimming all around us. Instead, my thoughts are a chaotic jumble, my apparently tumor-riddled brain obsessively cycling through the doctors' words.

Chemotherapy, radiation... thirty-percent survival rate.

Incompatible with a healthy pregnancy.

May not be able to have children, ever.

I squeeze my eyes shut and bury my face in Alexei's neck. He's warm and solid, the only thing that feels real in a world that has suddenly flipped on its axis. His familiar scent—winter forest, ocean, and leather—grounds me, even as dread and panic threaten to suffocate me.

All too soon, we've reached our destination, a windowless cabin furnished with a decent-sized bed, which is where Alexei gently deposits me before taking a seat on the edge of the mattress.

Underneath his tan, his skin is pale, his mouth a hard slash across his face as he grips my hand. "It's not certain yet," he says fiercely. "This is all just supposition at this point. You heard Kressler—they have to run more tests. Maybe it's nothing. Maybe the machines here are faulty."

"You don't really believe that," I say, closing my eyes.

I'm beyond drained. All I want to do is sleep. Maybe I'll wake up to find this was all a terrible nightmare. At the very least, if I sleep, I won't have to think about what the diagnosis means for me and the tiny life growing inside me.

Or for Alexei, whose decade-long obsession has saddled him with a defective, dying wife.

No, I can't bear to think about any of that right now.

Giving in to my exhaustion, I sink into a heavy, restless sleep.

WE'RE NO LONGER ON THE SUBMARINE WHEN I WAKE UP. I don't know where we are, but my head is pounding and I'm nauseated, so as soon as I open my eyes, I make a beeline for a door that I hope leads to a bathroom. I'm in luck—it is indeed a small bathroom—and after I vomit my guts out, I wash my face, brush my teeth, and clean up the best I can without my usual arsenal of makeup. Nor am I wearing my usual clothes; instead, I'm dressed in nothing but an oversized black T-shirt—likely Alexei's, judging by how it falls nearly to my knees.

I guess properly stocking this place, whatever it is, wasn't a priority for my husband.

Maybe it's the black color of the shirt, but my face in the small mirror above the sink is pale and haunted-looking. Without my usual dark eyeliner and red lipstick, I'm like a faded copy of myself. Not that it matters—I'm about to look much, much worse.

Squashing the thought before it can smother me in a dark shroud of despair, I return to the room and take stock of where I am.

The circular windows with fluffy white clouds below and the steady roar of powerful engines clue me in that I'm on an airplane, or more specifically, a luxurious private jet with a bedroom and an attached small bathroom.

I'm also all alone—something that doesn't surprise me in the least.

The honeymoon is definitely over, and the marriage might be too.

My stomach tightens painfully, and I feel sick all over again.

Stop, I tell myself. I don't care about that. If Alexei doesn't want me any longer, that can only be a good thing. I can't possibly be sad about that consequence of my diagnosis. Everything else, however... I lay a hand on my belly.

The baby.

She's not going to make it if I proceed with the treatment.

She might not make it regardless.

I don't know why I've decided that it's a she, but I'm convinced of it.

I have a daughter who won't make it to her birth day.

My chest feels as if a car has driven over it, and acidic tears sting my eyes. I didn't want this baby, but now that she's here, now that there's evidence of her existence in my blood, I can't imagine not having her. Currently, she's only a few quickly dividing cells, but I already see her as she could be—a squirming, red-faced newborn with Alexei's dark eyes... a giggling toddler with round cheeks and an affinity for trouble.

I see her so vividly it hurts.

A sound makes me jerk my head up.

It's the other door in the room.

It opens, and Alexei steps in.

"We're landing in Geneva in a few hours," he says, and for the first time since I've known him, he sounds and looks weary, his dark eyes framed by shadows and the sharp line of his jaw covered by stubble.

Has he not had any rest this whole time?

I have a sudden urge to lay my palm on his bristly cheek and tell him that it'll be all right, that everything is going to work out. Instead, as he approaches, I wipe at the wetness underneath my eyes and sit on the bed, bracing myself for what he's going to say.

Since planes are much easier to track than boats, it's clear that keeping me from my brothers is no longer a priority. In fact, he's most likely going to return me to them before things get really bad.

Sure enough, he sits on the bed, facing me, and says, "I've notified your brothers about the recent developments."

Up close, his face is even more tired, almost haggard... and somehow even more magnetic. It's all I can do not to reach for him and beg him to keep me—an utterly illogical urge given that freedom from him is all I've ever wanted.

"I've also set up the follow-up tests and the surgery," he continues. "Kressler's neurosurgery team is already on standby, so we're heading to the clinic as soon as we land."

Every word he speaks feels like the aforementioned car backing up and repeatedly rolling over my body. "About that..." I swallow hard, my insides twisting into a knot at what I'm about to say. "I'm not sure I want to proceed with the surgery or the treatment. Not given this." I cover my stomach with my hand, as if by doing so, I can protect the tiny, fragile life inside.

Alexei's eyes widen, then narrow dangerously. "What the fuck are you talking about? You're doing whatever it takes to get better."

"That's *my* decision to make."

“The fuck it is.” His words come out through clenched teeth. “You’re having the surgery, and you’re getting the treatment. I’m not letting you fucking die.”

I glare at him, my despair morphing into bitter anger. “What do you care? You’re going to hand me over to my brothers and get on with your life. I’m the one who—”

“Your brothers?” His nostrils flare. “Who said anything about handing you over to them? You’re my wife.” He grips my hand so hard it hurts. “You’re *mine*.”

My laugh tastes like cyanide. “Yeah, sure. Yours until my hair falls out from the chemo, and I start puking every hour, right? Or is it yours until I’m officially confirmed infertile?” He flinches, and I press my point, perversely triumphant. “You haven’t thought about that, have you? Unless this surgery miraculously fixes me—which the doctor all but said it won’t—my body will be radiated and pumped full of poison. Even if I survive, I’ll never be the same. My health, my looks, my ability to have children—it’ll all be gone. At most, I’ll be a shadow of my former self, living from scan to scan, always waiting for the cancer to return.” I yank my hand out of his hold and push to my feet, tears stinging my eyes anew as I choke out, “You picked the wrong woman to stalk for a decade, Alexei Leonov. You might as well admit your mistake and drop me off with my family, where I can live out the rest of my life as I see fit. Who knows? If the tumor doesn’t kill me in the next nine months, you might yet get a child out of this mess.”

CHAPTER 31

ALEXEI

She starts for the door, having thrown that grenade in my face, and I snap. I fucking snap. The past eighteen hours have been the worst of my life, and I've had some shitty times in my life. Since our conversation with the doctors, I haven't had a moment to eat or drink. Fuck, I don't even remember taking a piss. Between researching Alina's condition, making the arrangements for the surgery, and getting us to Europe from the middle of the fucking Pacific, I've been almost too busy to dwell on the terror and rage sloshing inside me—"almost" being the key word.

I'm on her before she can take two steps. Gripping her arm, I spin her around to face me. "You *are* mine." It's the growl of a deranged, wounded animal. "For better or worse, 'til death do us part, remember? I don't give a fuck if you lose all your hair or projectile-vomit nonstop—I am not letting you go. And I'm sure as fuck not letting this thing take you. You are having the surgery, the radiation, the chemo, and every treatment they offer, proven or experimental, and you are going to fucking live! For me, if not for yourself, you hear? You are going to survive this even if I have to lock you up in the fucking clinic and pump you full of poison myself!"

I don't know how or when my hands found their way to her shoulders, but they're there and I'm shaking her as she

stares up at me, her jade eyes wide and painfully bright. I'm shaking her, and then I'm kissing her, all the turmoil inside me coalescing into a violent surge of lust. She's all I've ever wanted, and the knowledge that I could lose her gives a mad, manic edge to my perpetual desire for her, to my overwhelming need to possess and protect her. Only I can't do the latter, not in this case. All I can do is show her with my body that I mean what I say, that she *is* mine and I'm not walking away, no matter how bad things get.

And they will get bad, I know. I know much more about it than she does because I've spent hours reading about the various types of gliomas, talking to Kressler and his colleagues, getting second, third, fourth, and fifth opinions on the scans done so far—and everything points to a tough battle ahead. But at the end of it, she will emerge victorious. I will make sure of it. And I sure as fuck won't let her fight it on her own. Or worse, surrender.

I can taste her tears as I deepen the kiss. The salt mixes with the minty flavor of her toothpaste and the tender sweetness of her lips, reminding me of other times I've made her cry. But it's different this time. It's not a game between us any longer. The stakes are far too high—and the knowledge spurs me on, filling me with a desperation that adds to my savage need.

Tearing my lips from hers, I flip her around in my arms and sink my teeth into the tightly corded tendon at the base of her neck. She gasps and arches against me, her hands flying up to grip my hair as I bunch the hem of her T-shirt in my fist and pull it up to her waist. I should be gentle, careful with her fragile state, but a feral animal seems to have taken control of me and I can't stop the growl that escapes my throat as I lick the spot I just bit, then push her over to the bed and bend her

over the edge, exposing the pale, deliciously round globes of her ass and the pink, glistening slit of her pussy.

I'm shaking with lust, shuddering with my hunger for her as I yank open my zipper and free my cock, then sink two fingers into her opening, stretching her tender flesh, preparing her for what's to come. She's already wet, thank fuck, her pussy slick and hot, her inner walls squeezing my fingers. If she weren't, I don't know what I'd do because I can't hold back any longer. I want her with an intensity that destroys any illusion of self-control and nullifies any attempt to be gentle.

Pulling out my fingers, I line my aching cock against her folds and push in, sinking deep in one hard thrust. She cries out, the sound muffled against the blanket as I grip her elbows, one in each hand, forcing her lower back to arch and her ass to stick out more, allowing for deeper penetration. She cries out again as I pull out and slam back in.

Her flesh is silky soft, wet and tight, so fucking hot I'm already on the verge of coming. My vision narrows to a tunnel as I hammer into her, each thrust taking me deeper, dragging me closer to the edge. Her cries grow in volume, mixing with feminine grunts and moans, and her pussy squeezes my cock, milking it in an unmistakable rhythm. Fuck, fuck, fuck... I throw my head back with a roar as her orgasm triggers mine, and I explode inside her, grinding my groin against her ass as violent ecstasy explodes through my body and floods my brain with white-hot pleasure.

For a few warm, blissfully hazy moments, I forget all about what got us here. I simply revel in the feel of my lungs sucking in deep breaths, in the smell of sex and her, in the feel of her slick, hot flesh clasp my softening dick. Then reality intrudes, and I realize that my fingers are digging into the

sides of her hips with what has to be a painful grip... that I fucked her without a condom—not that the latter matters any longer.

She's already pregnant.

She has cancer, and she's pregnant.

And I just took her like a ravening beast.

I grit my teeth and force my fingers to unclench, releasing her firm flesh. The blissful haze of the aftermath has vanished, leaving a hard, icy knot inside my chest.

“Alinyonok...” My voice is hoarse and unsteady as I reach for her again and carefully turn her over so she's face up on the mattress. I want to look into her eyes, but she's scrunched them shut. I see the wet trails on her cheeks, though, and for the first time, I truly feel like the monster she's accused me of being.

Did I hurt her? If so, how badly?

Before I can beg for forgiveness, she opens her eyes, meeting my gaze. Tears glaze the dark jade of her irises, but it's the pain her eyes reveal that makes the icy knot expand into my throat. Her lips, a soft, naked pink reddened by my kisses, tremble as she whispers, “What about the baby? Alexei...” Her voice catches. “What about our baby girl? She'll die if we do this. She'll never be born.”

Fuck. It's my turn to squeeze my eyes shut.

Our baby girl. Alina thinks we're having a girl—and there's a fifty-percent chance she's right.

I've tried my hardest not to think about the pregnancy in terms of an actual baby. I haven't even talked about it with the neurosurgeons I've consulted because what would be the

point? All of them have said that the sooner the treatment starts, the greater the odds that Alina survives. The tiny embryo forming inside her is not even a consideration. It can't be, not with Alina's life on the line. There's only one way forward: terminate the pregnancy as soon as possible and move on. Only... she thinks it's a baby girl.

I open my eyes to meet Alina's gaze. A fat tear clings to her lower lashes as she stares at me, and it feels like a thousand serrated blades are slicing through my heart, one by one. This is what I'd so coldly counted on when I took her: that once there would be a baby, she'd love it. She'd be attached to it, and thus to me. I didn't think it would happen at the embryo stage, but I would've been happy if it had.

Our baby girl.

The blades slice faster, harder.

"Alinyonok..." My voice is as raw as the look in her eyes. "I can't lose you." I cup her face and press my forehead to hers. "I need you to fight. And I'll be by your side as you do. We'll fight this together."

I can feel the puffs of her breath on my lower face. They're coming in a fast, unsteady rhythm, catching in her throat once in a while. Then a shudder ripples through her, and a sob tears from her mouth as she wraps her arms around my neck, buries her face in my throat, and begins to cry.

She cries in my arms for the next hour, and all I can do is hold her.

I'll always hold her, no matter what comes our way.

Thank you for following Alexei and Alina's journey! Their story continues in *Chained Fate*.

To be notified about my future books, sign up for my newsletter at www.annazaires.com.

Are you craving another dark, captive romance? Check out my *New York Times* bestselling [*Twist Me*](#) trilogy, following eighteen-year-old Nora and the powerful, dangerous man who abducts her.

Need more possessive, seductive heroes? Read the complete *USA Today* bestselling duet, [*White Nights*](#), written by me and the incredibly talented Charmaine Pauls. It's the thrilling story of Alex Volkov, a ruthless Russian oligarch, and Kate, the American nurse who catches his eye.

If you like audiobooks, please visit www.annazaires.com to check out this series and our other books in audio.

Now, please turn the page to read excerpts from [*Twist Me*](#) and [*White Nights*](#).

EXCERPT FROM TWIST ME BY
ANNA ZAIRES

Kidnapped. Taken to a private island.

I never thought this could happen to me. I never imagined one chance meeting on the eve of my eighteenth birthday could change my life so completely.

Now I belong to him. To Julian. To a man who is as ruthless as he is beautiful—a man whose touch makes me burn. A man whose tenderness I find more devastating than his cruelty.

My captor is an enigma. I don't know who he is or why he took me. There is a darkness inside him—a darkness that scares me even as it draws me in.

My name is Nora Leston, and this is my story.

Leah picks me up at 9 p.m.

She's dressed for clubbing—dark skinny jeans, a sparkly black tube-top, and over-the-knee high-heeled boots. Her

blond hair is perfectly smooth and straight, falling down her back like a highlighted waterfall.

In contrast, I'm still wearing my sneakers. My clubbing shoes I hide in the backpack that I intend to leave in Leah's car. A thick sweater hides the sexy top I'm wearing. No makeup and my long brown hair in a ponytail.

I leave the house like that to avoid any suspicion. I tell my parents I'm going to hang out with Leah at a friend's house. My mom smiles and tells me to have fun.

Now that I'm almost eighteen, I don't have a curfew anymore. Well, I probably do, but it's not a formal one. As long as I come home before my parents start freaking out—or at least if I let them know where I am—it's all good.

Once I get into Leah's car, I begin my transformation.

Off goes the thick sweater, revealing the slinky tank-top I have on underneath. I wore a push-up bra to maximize my somewhat-undersized assets. The bra straps are cleverly designed to look cute, so I'm not embarrassed to have them show. I don't have cool boots like Leah's, but I did manage to sneak out my nicest pair of black heels. They add about four inches to my height. I need every single one of those inches, so I put on the shoes.

Next, I pull out my makeup bag and pull down the windshield visor, so I can get access to the mirror.

Familiar features stare back at me. Large brown eyes and clearly defined black eyebrows dominate my small face. Rob once told me that I look exotic, and I can kind of see that. Even though I'm only a quarter Latino, my skin always looks lightly tanned and my eyelashes are unusually long. Fake lashes, Leah calls them, but they're entirely real.

I don't have a problem with my looks, although I often wish I were taller. It's those Mexican genes of mine. My abuela was petite and so am I, even though both of my parents are of average height. I wouldn't care, except Jake likes tall girls. I don't think he even sees me in the hallway; I'm literally below his eye level.

Sighing, I put on lip gloss and some eye shadow. I don't go crazy with makeup because simple works best on me.

Leah cranks up the radio, and the latest pop songs fill the car. I grin and start singing along with Rihanna. Leah joins me, and now we're both belting out S&M lyrics.

Before I know it, we arrive at the club.

We walk in like we own the place. Leah gives the bouncer a big smile, and we flash our IDs. They let us through, no problem.

We've never been to this club before. It's in an older, slightly rundown part of downtown Chicago.

"How did you find this place?" I yell at Leah, shouting to be heard above the music.

"Ralph told me about it," she yells back, and I roll my eyes.

Ralph is Leah's ex-boyfriend. They broke up when he started acting weird, but they still talk for some reason. I think he's into drugs or something these days. I'm not sure, and Leah won't tell me out of some misplaced loyalty to him. He's the king of shady, and the fact that we're here on his recommendation is not super-comforting.

But whatever. Sure, the area outside is not the best, but the music is good and the crowd is a nice mix of people.

We're here to party, and that's exactly what we do for the next hour. Leah gets a couple of guys to buy us shots. We don't have more than one drink each. Leah—because she has to drive us home. And me—because I don't metabolize alcohol well. We may be young, but we're not stupid.

After the shots, we dance. The two guys who bought us drinks dance with us, but we gradually migrate away from them. They're not that cute. Leah finds a group of college-age hotties, and we sidle up to them. She strikes up a conversation with one of them, and I smile, watching her in action. She's good at this flirting business.

In the meantime, my bladder tells me I need to visit the ladies' room. So I leave them and go.

On my way back, I ask the bartender for a glass of water. I am thirsty after all the dancing.

He gives it to me, and I greedily gulp it down. When I'm done, I put down the glass and look up.

Straight into a pair of piercing blue eyes.

He's sitting on the other side of the bar, about ten feet away. And he's staring at me.

I stare back. I can't help it. He's probably the most handsome man I've ever seen.

His hair is dark and curls slightly. His face is hard and masculine, each feature perfectly symmetrical. Straight dark eyebrows over those strikingly pale eyes. A mouth that could belong to a fallen angel.

I suddenly feel warm as I imagine that mouth touching my skin, my lips. If I were prone to blushing, I would've been beet-red.

He gets up and walks toward me, still holding me with his gaze. He walks leisurely. Calmly. He's completely sure of himself. And why not? He's gorgeous, and he knows it.

As he approaches, I realize that he's a large man. Tall and well built. I don't know how old he is, but I'm guessing he's closer to thirty than twenty. A man, not a boy.

He stands next to me, and I have to remember to breathe.

"What's your name?" he asks softly. His voice somehow carries above the music, its deeper notes audible even in this noisy environment.

"Nora," I say quietly, looking up at him. I am absolutely mesmerized, and I'm pretty sure he knows it.

He smiles. His sensuous lips part, revealing even white teeth. "Nora. I like that."

He doesn't introduce himself, so I gather my courage and ask, "What's your name?"

"You can call me Julian," he says, and I watch his lips moving. I've never been so fascinated by a man's mouth before.

"How old are you, Nora?" he asks next.

I blink. "Twenty-one."

His expression darkens. "Don't lie to me."

"Almost eighteen," I admit reluctantly. I hope he doesn't tell the bartender and get me kicked out of here.

He nods, like I confirmed his suspicions. And then he raises his hand and touches my face. Lightly, gently. His thumb rubs against my lower lip, as though he's curious about its texture.

I'm so shocked that I just stand there. Nobody has ever done that before, touched me so casually, so possessively. I feel hot and cold at the same time, and a tendril of fear snakes down my spine. There is no hesitation in his actions. No asking for permission, no pausing to see if I would let him touch me.

He just touches me. Like he has the right to do so. Like I belong to him.

I draw in a shaky breath and back away. "I have to go," I whisper, and he nods again, watching me with an inscrutable expression on his beautiful face.

I know he's letting me go, and I feel pathetically grateful—because something deep inside me senses that he could've easily gone further, that he doesn't play by the normal rules.

That he's probably the most dangerous creature I've ever met.

I turn and make my way through the crowd. My hands are trembling, and my heart is pounding in my throat.

I need to leave, so I grab Leah and make her drive me home.

As we're walking out of the club, I look back and I see him again. He's still staring at me.

There is a dark promise in his gaze—something that makes me shiver.

Order your copy of [*Twist Me*](#) today!

EXCERPT FROM WHITE NIGHTS BY
ANNA ZAIRES AND CHARMAINE
PAULS

Power. That's what I think of when I spot him across the ER. Power and danger.

One of the wealthiest Russian oligarchs, Alex Volkov is as ruthless as he is magnetic. He always gets what he wants, and what he wants is me, in his bed.

He's the kind of trouble every woman should run from. The bullet his bodyguard took for him proves that.

I should stay far away, but for one night, I give in to temptation. Before I know it, he's pulling me deeper into his world of excess and violence, invading not only my life but my heart.

How much trust can I place in a man so dangerous? How much do I dare risk for his love?

Turning away from the sink, I look back at the wounded man, making sure everything is okay with him before I go check on

my other patients.

At that moment, I catch a pair of steely blue eyes looking at me.

It's one of the men standing near the victim, likely one of his relatives. Visitors are generally not allowed in the hospital at night, but the ER is an exception.

Instead of looking away, as most people will when caught staring, the man continues to study me.

Both intrigued and slightly annoyed, I study him back.

He's tall, well over six feet in height, and broad-shouldered. He's not handsome in the traditional sense. That's too weak of a word to describe him. Instead, he's magnetic.

Power. That's what comes to mind when I look at him. It's there in the arrogant tilt of his head, in the way he looks at me so calmly, utterly sure of himself and his ability to control all around him. I don't know who he is or what he does, but I doubt he's a pencil pusher in some office. This is a man used to issuing orders and having them obeyed.

His clothes fit him well and look expensive. Maybe even custom made. He's wearing a gray trench coat, dark gray pants with a subtle pinstripe, and a pair of black Italian leather shoes. His brown hair is cut short, almost military style. The simple haircut suits his face, revealing hard, symmetric features. He has high cheekbones and a blade of a nose with a slight bump, as though it had been broken once.

I have no idea how old he is. His face is unlined, but there's no boyishness to it. No softness whatsoever, not even in the curve of his mouth. I guess his age to be early thirties, but he can just as easily be twenty-five or forty.

He doesn't fidget or look uncomfortable as our staring contest continues. He simply stands there quietly, completely still, his blue gaze trained on me.

To my shock, my heart rate picks up as a tingle of heat runs down my spine. It's as though the temperature in the room has jumped ten degrees. All of a sudden, the atmosphere becomes intensely sexual, making me aware of myself as a woman in a way I've never experienced. I can feel the silky material of my matching underwear set brushing between my legs and against my breasts. My entire body seems flushed and sensitized, my nipples pebbling underneath my layers of clothing.

Holy shit.

So that's what it feels like to be attracted to someone. It's not rational and logical. There's no meeting of minds and hearts involved. No, the urge is basic and primitive. My body has sensed his on some animal level, and it wants to mate.

He feels it too. It shows in the way his blue eyes darken, lids partially lowering, and in the way his nostrils flare as though trying to catch my scent. His fingers twitch, curl into fists, and I somehow know he's trying to control himself, to avoid reaching for me right then and there.

If we were alone, I have no doubt he'd be on me already.

Still staring at the stranger, I back away. The strength of my response to him is frightening, unsettling. We're in the middle of the ER, surrounded by people, and all I can think about is hot, sheet-twisting sex. I have no idea who he is, whether he's married or single. For all I know, he's a criminal or an asshole. *Or a cheating scumbag like Tony.* If anyone has taught me to think twice before trusting a man, it's my ex-boyfriend. I don't want to get involved with anyone so soon

after my last, disastrous relationship. I don't want that kind of complication in my life again.

The tall stranger clearly has other ideas.

At my cautious retreat, he narrows his eyes, his gaze becoming sharper, more focused. Then he comes toward me, his stride graceful for such a large man. There's something panther-like in his leisurely movements, and for a second, I feel like a mouse getting stalked by a big cat. Instinctively, I take another step back, and his hard mouth tightens with displeasure.

Dammit, I'm acting like a coward.

I stop backing away and stand my ground instead, straightening to my full five-foot-seven height. I'm always the calm and capable one, handling high-stress situations with ease, yet I'm behaving like a schoolgirl confronted with her first crush. Yes, the man makes me uncomfortable, but there's nothing to be afraid of. What's the worst he can do? Ask me out on a date?

Nevertheless, my hands shake slightly as he approaches, stopping less than two feet away. This close, he's even taller than I thought, a few inches over six feet. I'm not a short woman, but I feel tiny standing in front of him. It's not a feeling I enjoy.

"You're very good at your job." His voice is deep and a little rough, tinged with some Eastern European accent. Just hearing it makes my insides shiver in a strangely pleasurable way.

"Thank you," I say, a bit uncertainly. I *am* good at my job, but I didn't expect a compliment from this stranger.

"You took care of Igor well. Thank you for that."

Igor must be the gunshot patient. It's a foreign-sounding name. Russian, perhaps? That would explain the stranger's accent. Although he speaks English fluently, he's not a native speaker.

"Of course." I'm proud of the steadiness of my tone. Hopefully, the man won't realize how he affects me. "I hope he recovers quickly. Is he a relative?"

"My bodyguard."

Wow. I was right. This man is a big fish. Does that mean—

"Was he shot in the course of duty?" I ask, holding my breath.

"He took a bullet meant for me, yes." His tone is matter-of-fact, but I get a sense of suppressed rage underneath those words.

I swallow hard. "Did you already speak to the police?"

"I gave them a brief statement. I will talk to them in more detail once Igor is stabilized and regains consciousness."

I nod, not knowing what to say to that. The man standing in front of me was nearly assassinated today. What is he? Some mafia boss? A political figure?

If I had any doubts about the wisdom of exploring this strange attraction between us, they're gone. This stranger is bad news, and I need to stay as far away from him as possible.

"I wish your bodyguard a speedy recovery," I say in a falsely cheerful tone. "Barring any complications, he should be fine."

"Thanks to you."

I give him a half-smile and take a step to the side, hoping to walk around the man and go to my next patient.

He shifts his stance, blocking my way. “I’m Alex Volkov,” he says quietly. “And you are?”

My pulse picks up. The male intent in his question makes me nervous. Hoping he’ll get the hint, I say, “Just a nurse working here.”

He doesn’t catch on, or he pretends not to. “What’s your name?”

He’s certainly persistent. I take a deep breath. “I’m Katherine Morrell. If you’ll excuse me—”

“Katherine,” he repeats, his accent lending the familiar syllables an exotic edge. His hard mouth softens a bit. “Katerina. It’s a beautiful name.”

“Thank you. I really have to go.”

I’m increasingly anxious to get away. He’s too large, too potently male. I need space and some room to breathe. His nearness is overpowering, making me edgy and restless, leaving me craving something that I know will be bad for me.

“You have your job to do. I understand,” he says, looking vaguely amused.

Still, he doesn’t move out of my way. Instead, as I watch in shock, he raises one large hand and brushes his knuckles over my cheek.

I freeze as a wave of heat zaps through my body. His touch is light, but I feel branded by it, shaken to the core.

“I would like to see you again, Katerina,” he says softly, dropping his hand. “When does your shift end tonight?”

I stare at him, feeling like I'm losing control of the situation. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?" His blue eyes narrow. "Are you married?"

I'm tempted to lie, but honesty wins out. "No, but I'm not interested in dating right now."

"Who said anything about dating?"

I blink. I assumed—

He lifts his hand again, stopping me mid-thought. This time, he picks up a strand of my hair, rubbing it between his fingers.

"I don't date, Katerina," he murmurs, his accented voice oddly mesmerizing. "But I would like to take you to bed. And I think you'd like that too."

Order your copy of [*White Nights*](#) today!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna Zaires is a *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and #1 international bestselling author of sci-fi romance and contemporary dark erotic romance. She fell in love with books at the age of five, when her grandmother taught her to read. Since then, she has always lived partially in a fantasy world where the only limits were those of her imagination. Currently residing in Florida, Anna is happily married to Dima Zales (a science fiction and fantasy author) and closely collaborates with him on all their works.

To learn more, please visit www.annazaires.com.