

A close-up portrait of a man with short, dark hair, a beard, and visible tattoos on his neck and chest. He is wearing a dark, button-down shirt and looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

ARRANGED MARRIAGE
MAFIA ROMANCE

MOROZOV BRATVA

BETRAYED

by the Bratva

LEXI ASHER

BETRAYED BY THE MAFIA

Arranged Marriage Mafia Romance

Morozov Bratva Book 8

Lexi Asher

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Contents

[Chapter 1 - Roman](#)

[Chapter 2 - Karine](#)

[Chapter 3 - Roman](#)

[Chapter 4 - Karine](#)

[Chapter 5 - Roman](#)

[Chapter 6 - Karine](#)

[Chapter 7 - Roman](#)

[Chapter 8 - Karine](#)

[Chapter 9 - Roman](#)

[Chapter 10 - Karine](#)

[Chapter 11 - Roman](#)

[Chapter 12 - Karine](#)

[Chapter 13 - Roman](#)

[Chapter 14 - Karine](#)

[Chapter 15 - Roman](#)

[Chapter 16 - Karine](#)

[Chapter 17 - Roman](#)

[Chapter 18 - Karine](#)

[Chapter 19 - Roman](#)

[Chapter 20 - Karine](#)

[Chapter 21 - Roman](#)

[Chapter 22 - Karine](#)

[Chapter 23 - Roman](#)

[Chapter 24 - Karine](#)

[Chapter 25 - Roman](#)

[Chapter 26 - Karine](#)

[Chapter 27 - Roman](#)

[Chapter 28 - Karine](#)

[Chapter 29 - Roman](#)

[Chapter 30 - Karine](#)

[Chapter 31 - Roman](#)

[Epilogue - Karine](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Books by Lexi Asher](#)

Chapter 1 - Roman

Staring at the ceiling of my new apartment, I listened to the dark-haired woman gently snoring next to me, while remaining lazily trapped under her arm. I gave it a few seconds to try to remember her name but decided she probably wouldn't remember mine either, once she woke up.

Miami Beach nightlife was insane, and meeting her at the third or fourth club I dropped in on last night was as much a blur as the places. Normally, I stuck to the same old haunts back home in Los Angeles, where people knew me and knew what to expect. Being in a new town—almost with a whole new identity and lease on life was exhilarating, and I was making the most of it.

Growing antsy and wanting to start the day, I finally gently extricated myself from her smooth, slender arm. Not even the glimpse of softly rounded flesh as the sheet slipped away could get me too interested in another round. I had much more important things to attend to, and there'd be someone just as eager to take her place tonight if that's what I wanted. The lovely woman murmured and rolled over, and I decided to let her sleep a bit longer since I still had to prepare for my meeting.

Out in the vast, open-plan living area, I was distracted by the wall of floor-to-ceiling windows, similar to the ones in my Hollywood Hills mansion, but with a completely different view. The view continued to take my breath away, even after being here for almost a month. After turning the coffee machine on to get the jolt of caffeine I needed to shake off last night, I stepped out onto my balcony and breathed in the salty, still-cool morning air.

A couple of joggers ran past on the strand far below my highrise, and a few people were already down at the waterline, heads down, very seriously searching for whatever treasure might have washed up on the shore. Other than that, it

was nothing but miles and miles of crystal blue water and white sand. Despite not yet being ninety degrees, the sultry humidity clung to my skin, making me shrug off my bathrobe.

I shouldn't have been so impressed by the scene since I lived about half an hour from an even bigger ocean. But the dark, angry Pacific just didn't compare somehow, and since my twin brother and I were always working at our finance firm, we rarely got even a glimpse of the beach, let alone a long, lazy day at one. The spectacular view made me consider convincing Sergei to open up a permanent office here, but right now, he was barely speaking to me. He was flat-out refusing to have anything to do with Miami and the reason I was here.

That reason, and my steely determination to carry it out, no matter what my more level-headed brother had to say about it, dragged me off the balcony and back into the apartment.

"Half an hour," I shouted toward the bedroom, listening for any kind of acquiescence from my overnight date. "Then I've got to go."

A gravelly purr answered back. "I could wait for you to get back..."

I poured two mugs of coffee, and headed back in to find her wrapped up in my expensive Egyptian cotton sheets, looking aimlessly around for her clothes. I handed her one of the cups and hooked her skimpy club dress up with my finger, and tossed it onto the bed.

"Sorry, babe. Got way too much to do today."

She merely shrugged, sipped the hot brew, and wriggled into her dress, keeping her eyes locked on me to see if I was enjoying the view. Sure, I was, but I was totally focused on the task ahead of me, the job I'd been working for the last month. The one thing I wasn't going to be distracted from, no matter how inviting her tits looked as she smoothed the tight black fabric down over them.

By the time I was out of the shower, she was gone, and I breathed a sigh of relief as I got dressed for my meeting with Feliks Dryga. This was the sixth meeting with the dangerous crime boss since I relocated to Miami and the sole reason I was there. Well, he was the means to an end, really. The reason I was here was much deeper. And important enough to risk my relationship with my brother, who thought I was insane for delving into this world.

We both knew about the world of organized crime, having grown up in Los Angeles with a scrappy single mother who had to fight tooth and nail to give us every opportunity to become as successful as we were. While Sergei kept his nose squeaky clean, I wasn't as averse to building alliances with the mafia factions in our city. Still, I never thought I'd get as close to the Bratva—the Russian brotherhood rife in Miami—as I was now.

Not just benefiting from favors, but getting down and dirty with legit criminals. It wasn't because of Dryga's money, of which he had a staggering amount. I had plenty of my own, thanks to our years of hard work and our mother's sacrifices. Dealing with Dryga was personal and I was doing this for both Sergei and myself. I was convinced he'd come around even if Sergei didn't get it yet.

I still had some time before the meeting, so I poured a second cup of coffee and settled onto the balcony lounge chair, letting the rapidly warming air ruffle my hair while I stared at the ocean to get my thoughts in order and my rising emotions in check.

A little more than a month ago, Sergei started going through our mother's personal belongings. A year and a half had passed since her death, much too soon to lose her for either of us. The house we'd bought for her ten years earlier when our business really took off was already dealt with, but there was a storage shed on his property full of old pictures, journals from her youth, and sentimental things that weren't worth anything, but priceless at the same time. He'd called me

out of a meeting, something that we never did. Never. I seriously thought he was on his way to the hospital.

“You need to get over here.”

“Where are you heading?” I asked, still thinking he was in an ambulance.

He was at home, demanding I drop everything and get to his house immediately. The tone of his voice, going from strong and assured to barely being able to scrape out the words, got me going in a hurry. I found him out in the middle of his highly cultivated jungle of a backyard, sitting in the open doorway of the shed, surrounded by open boxes and clutching a folder full of old papers and photos.

“What the fuck are you calling me out of a seven hundred thousand dollar pitch meeting?” I demanded, pissed and relieved at the same time. “I thought you were having a heart attack at age thirty-six.”

He shook his head, holding out the folder. “I found our father,” he said. “I know who he is.”

This stunned me enough to sink onto the carefully tended grass beside him, letting him shove the folder into my hands. All during our childhood, I had regularly asked our mother where our dad was. Who he was. Just a name. Normally loving, warm, and gregarious, this would shut her right down. She would demand to know if she wasn't enough for us, her clear blue eyes filling with tears. Of course, she was, and eventually, once I hit my teens, I stopped asking.

But I never stopped caring, or wondering who the man who left us alone before we were even born was. As for Sergei, he'd purported to not give a shit, but the look on his face at that time told me it had all been a lie. Or maybe it was just shock at finding out who he was.

“Oleg Morozov?” I asked, rifling through the papers.

An old photograph showed a tall man who looked shockingly like Sergei and me. Dark wavy hair that fell in unkempt, wild tangles down to his collar like Sergei still did.

Same strong jaw and mid-day scruff we both had. Peering closer, it looked like he had brown eyes, whereas ours were blue like our mom's. The back of the picture had *Moscow—first date* scrawled across it in our mother's feathery handwriting.

“He's still in Russia,” Sergei said.

“How do you know?”

He tapped the restaurant behind them in the picture. “That place is still around. He owns it. He owns a lot of places in Moscow, apparently.”

Leave it to Sergei to get the Googling out of the way before he called me, needing to verify everything before he broke the news. “What do we do?” I asked, already itching to get on our plane and head to Russia.

“We leave the motherfucker alone,” he said, laughing ruefully at his inadvertently literal insult. “He's not just a successful businessman over there, Roman. He's mafia. Big time.”

“You can't know that from five minutes of internet searching,” I said. “Not if he's in Moscow.”

“He had a brother, who had sons. They're all in the US. Miami. And they're big-time mafia, too. Enough so that their shit has made the news. Enough that the reporters who wrote about them haven't written anything since.”

“We've got cousins?” was all I could say to that.

He swallowed hard, putting his head in his hands and ruffling up his already messy hair. Thinking back to those revelations made me smooth my hand over the razor precision of my own short hair. I liked to be in control of everything, down to the unruly strands on my head. At the time, it had bizarrely pissed me off to see where we'd gotten our curls, since our mother's dark hair was pin-straight.

“It looks like we might have siblings, too,” he said.

Learning that had cracked something inside me, even more as we continued to dig and found out he'd raised that other set of twins, married their mother, and seemed to dote on them to this very day, even though both of them had recently moved over here to America.

Sergei noped out when I announced I was going over to meet them. He knew me all too well, and it was true I didn't have the best intentions when I set off on that initial flight. I wanted to destroy our father, take down everything he had that he'd never shared with us. Knowing that he'd been rich and powerful when our mother was struggling to keep us fed, had gone without so we could get our educations, lit a fire of rage in me that I didn't think could be doused.

Until I showed up at Oleg Morozov's doorstep with the proof of who I was, thrusting the photograph of him and our mother into his hands. He no longer had a full head of curly hair, and while he was still tall and proud, he seemed to wilt at the sight of it. I blurted out who I was, and told him about Sergei as well.

The old man promptly clutched his chest and fell to the floor of his ritzy Moscow home. The shock in his eyes was unmistakable. He hadn't known we existed. It didn't take me half a second to decide I couldn't let him die, not without getting all the answers I wanted. I called for help, riding along with him to the hospital. When he was stable enough to talk to me, he wanted to know everything, getting so worked up with emotion that the nurses warned him I'd have to leave if he didn't stay calm.

"Ah, poor Lidiya," he said, reaching once again for the photo of them together. "She must have been so scared." He looked at me with a pained expression that I could tell had nothing to do with his heart attack. "We were so young, barely twenty. I'm sorry to have to say that even though we were wild about each other, it wasn't true love. She must have known I'd marry her despite that."

“You would have?” I asked, more of the ice around my heart melting.

“Of course. Nothing is more important than family.” His face drooped. “She would have been miserable. She hated the life and wanted no part of it.”

“The life?” I prodded, wanting him to confess what he really was.

“Oh, my boy, there’s so much I have to tell you. But first, I want to know everything about you and your brother. Twins! I can’t believe it, but my own son—your brother—just had a set of his own. The Morozov genes must be just that strong.”

“Half brother,” I reminded him. “And my last name is Anishin.”

He blinked and shrugged it off, reaching for my arm to squeeze in his grip, still strong even after suffering a major cardiac arrest. “I won’t hear about half this or that. You’re my son, so you’re Leo’s brother. And, of course, your last name is Anishin. Of course.”

I was glad he didn’t push it, and proudly told him all about Sergei’s and my finance company. We started it online in college, each of us working two jobs to supplement the money our mother had scrimped and saved to help us be able to go. His beaming smile when I told him it was now one of the top investment firms in the US was more poignant than I expected. I’d tried to pretend my mother’s love, pride, and acceptance were enough, but deep down, I wished I’d also had a father. And now it seemed like I did.

It took a week for him to be released from the hospital, and I watched him have many conversations with my new half-siblings while he recuperated. They were as shocked as Sergei and I had been. Both of them were having trouble coming to terms with it, especially our new sister, Evelina, who I overheard her refer to us as ‘those guys’ more than once. Ten years younger than us and with their lives just as

upended, I cut her a little bit of slack. The fact that they'd not only grown up in 'the life' as Oleg referred to being part of the Bratva, but were quite powerful in their own rites was fascinating to me.

Evelina and her twin, Leo, landed in Moscow as Oleg was released from the hospital. He chattered excitedly as his driver took us both back to his house, while I sat in silence, not sure what to expect. Oleg had been surprisingly forthcoming about his business ventures as he shared his past and present with me during the hours I'd sat at his bedside trying to get to know him. My father. It was bizarre, to say the least, but I was oddly happy. Almost content. I wanted to really be a part of it all, no matter what it was.

My new sister was a petite ball of energy, fluttering around Oleg and sniping at him for refusing to sit in a wheelchair. She pushed her shoulder-length dark hair into a messy ponytail and gave me an eye roll before thrusting out her hand to me.

"I guess I'm your sister," she said, pulling Leo forward from the shadows of the hallway. He towered over Evelina, but we were just about eye to eye, and it was like looking in a slightly distorted mirror with the coloring just a little bit off. "And this is Leo."

"We're not going to be awkward," Oleg commanded, pulling us all together into a hug. "This is a miracle."

"A miracle that put you in the hospital," Evelina grumbled. "Go sit down. I'll help Irina bring lunch in."

"It better not be that low cholesterol slop they've been forcing down me in the hospital," Oleg grumbled right back, but let Leo lead him into a sitting room that was richly furnished in old-fashioned, traditional style, as if it hadn't been changed since the house was built, probably a hundred years ago.

I followed, letting everything wash over me, stunned when Oleg announced I'd be staying there instead of the hotel

I was in. “It’ll be like old times,” he said. “Like it should have been,” he corrected. “But when will Sergei arrive?”

I’d been working on my twin to get him to ease up on his stubbornness, but he refused to visit. He didn’t want any part of our new family, or what they represented. I’d told him countless times that he could get to know Oleg without getting involved in the Bratva, but he’d hung up enough times on me that I quit asking. I told Oleg that things were haywire at our company, but not to worry. I meant to wear Sergei down so we could be part of the tight-knit family they clearly already were.

Evelina returned, laden down with a big tray, along with another young woman who teetered under her load of dishes. They chattered away together as if they hadn’t seen each other in a long time, barely noticing when I jumped up to take a teapot from the stranger before it toppled to the floor.

“Is this another sister?” I asked, only half joking when Leo helped her put the tray on the large, round coffee table and then hugged her.

“Might as well be,” he said, while Oleg introduced her.

“This is Irina Gusev, my right-hand woman,” he said, smiling at her with a hint of sadness in his eyes. “Her father was one of my closest friends. I didn’t know how I’d survive without all his help, but thankfully, Irina stepped in to take over everything he did for me.”

I politely offered my condolences, murmuring that I’d recently lost my mother as well, and her grateful smile lit up her small, porcelain pale features and made her bright green eyes sparkle.

“I’m definitely a lot better at wrangling little kids than mob bosses,” she joked, sliding onto the couch next to Evelina.

“Oh my gosh, that’s right,” Evelina said, reaching to pour us all cups of steaming hot, fragrant tea. “You used to be a nanny, didn’t you?”

“I was working in a daycare center when Papa...” she trailed off and wiped her eyes. “Of course, I was happy to step up and help Oleg in any way I could.” Her voice lowered. “But seriously, I miss my simple life outside of all this.”

I wanted to commiserate with her. I was only a week into learning about the ins and outs of the Bratva, and it did seem like a lot. I could see it being way too much if someone wasn't fully committed. It was why I couldn't be angry at our mother for running from this life. Yes, there was a tinge of bitterness at her secrecy, but she'd always only done what she thought was best for Sergei and me, and forgiveness came easy. Especially now that I no longer wanted to destroy Oleg and everything he stood for. I wanted only to be a part of it.

I kept my mouth shut, not wanting to intrude on the private conversation, but I heard Evelina offer her a position as a nanny for her little boy. “You should come visit Miami, at any rate,” she said.

“I'd love that,” Irina breathed but looked at Oleg with concern.

He seemed to notice, really, that he seemed aware of everything around him all at once. “Don't you start feeling guilty about this poor old man, Irina,” he boomed, as if he'd never had a heart attack. “If you want to try American life, you go right ahead.”

Evelina and Leo stared at their father—our father—with open mouths. “So it only took a near-death experience to get you to lighten up?” they asked, almost in unison.

Oleg laughed. “As if that was my first, or worst, near-death experience.”

Then, the four of them began sharing harrowing stories. Leo had been beaten, shot, and hung over the side of the building. Evelina had been kidnapped. Even Irina, who said she tried to stay out of the Bratva business dealings, was nearly run over by one of Morozov's many enemies when she was only a young girl.

“Um, I was in a couple of earthquakes,” I said, joining in with their good-natured laughter. “Had a bookshelf fall over onto me in a 5.6.”

“You’ll get better stories soon enough,” Leo said.

“Don’t curse him!” Evelina admonished.

I’d expected an icy reception and had gotten nothing but this warm welcome, as if I’d always been a part of them. Of course, as soon as I found out Evelina and Leo were computer and surveillance experts, I knew they’d done their homework on me. I had nothing to hide, so there was no reason for them to be suspicious. Going above and beyond to accept me the way they did was unexpected and appreciated more than I could express.

“No, I can’t wait,” I told them.

Oleg gave me a long look, then changed the subject while we ate the hearty Russian meal. Pretty soon, it turned back to them complaining about a family that had just started giving them trouble in Miami.

“They’re good,” Evelina said, shaking her head in disgust. “I can’t infiltrate anything yet.”

“Do you need me to come down?” Leo asked. “I can pack up the Long Island crew and set up shop on the beach for a while. I doubt I’ll get many complaints.”

She shook her head. “No, you’ve got enough going on up there. I’ll figure out a way to get someone on the inside. It’s just that these Drygas are wily bastards, and they know who all of us are.”

“They don’t know who I am,” I piped up, surprising everyone.

Even myself. I’d gone from wanting to crush these people, to wanting to be accepted, to volunteering to get involved with their criminal activities? With dangerous men who’d kill me a lot more efficiently than a bookcase in an earthquake could ever do.

Irina scuttled back to the kitchen, becoming uncomfortable with the talk turning to business and the sudden scrutiny Oleg and my new siblings gave me.

“He’s squeaky clean,” Evelina said. “Untraceable to us.”

“But the squeaky clean part,” Leo argued.

I shook my head. “I’ve had my fair share of shady dealings,” I said. “You don’t get to be a billionaire at thirty-six *just* with hard work.” They both snickered while Oleg continued to stare at me thoughtfully.

“You’re sure you want to be part of this?” he asked.

He meant the mission of infiltrating this Dryga family who was causing his own family trouble. That was all. But I meant so much more. I wanted him to see me like he saw Leo, Evelina, and his nephews. Yes, I was capable and successful already, but I wanted to be capable and successful at this. The life our mother had run from and that I was running right back to with open arms.

My phone alarm dinged, bringing me back to the present and reminding me it was time to get going. I stood up and gazed out at the ocean for another minute as I gulped down the last sip of coffee. That was how I’d become the new financial advisor to Feliks Dryga.

It took nothing at all to meet him, spreading the word that my brother and I were setting up an office on the East Coast and had chosen Miami for the sun, sand, and great social life over stuffy New York City. Setting up a new branch is the one thing that Sergei is on board with. If I can make my father proud at the same time as increasing our already huge fortune, not even he can complain about that. Although, he still did, and plenty.

In fact, as I headed down the strand toward the private island where Dryga lived, Sergei’s name flashed on my car’s console. I was too close to want to deal with his words of caution, so I ordered my phone to send him a message saying

I'd call him back. I got an eye roll emoji in reply and laughed as I pulled through the gates leading up to Dryga's house.

Compound was more like it. As a bachelor who spent three-quarters of his time at work and most of the rest out partying, I didn't need anything nearly so showy, so the mansion I kept in LA was just for the occasional dinner party to impress clients. Dryga's place was one of the biggest, gaudiest displays of wealth I'd ever seen and made my place look like the guest house behind the pool.

Three sprawling, pink stucco houses were spread out over acres of lushly landscaped property, all with pristine, white gravel driveways snaking up to them. Tall palm trees waved in the wind high above the russet tile roofs, and the blazing Florida sunshine glinted off all the windows behind the rows of wrought iron balconies. I pulled my rental up behind the glossy black Rolls Royce parked in front of the main house and nodded to the man who hurried over to take my keys.

Feliks Dryga and I had already played golf at his club and had several dinner meetings in swanky restaurants, but this was the first time he'd invited me to his home. Even though I was sure I had his money in the bag for my investment proposal, I considered this invitation a sign of trust.

His daughter greeted me at the door, as coldly polite as usual. Around twenty years old, she was tall, though she only came to about my shoulder, with a face that could have rivaled any of the thousands of models that Miami was infested with. Her willowy, curvy body was a distraction I had to fight not to gaze at for too long as she gave me her tight little smile and ushered me through the long foyer toward the back of the house. She was definitely someone I'd take home if she gave me a glance at one of the many clubs I'd been frequenting since I arrived, but I made sure to keep my face neutral and not openly stare at her ass swaying only a few feet ahead of me.

“It’s nice to see you again,” she said, barely turning back to say the words in her quiet, melodic voice.

She’d been present during one of our dinner meetings, and it had been just as much of a fight to keep my eyes off her then. She’d barely spoken, only answering direct questions from either me or her father. It was clear she was intelligent, just cold as ice. If she wasn’t the enemy and I didn’t think her father would put a hit out on me, I’d definitely be interested in breaking through all that frost to see what kind of heat I could bring out.

While she accompanied her father to that one business meeting of ours, that was straight investment talk, so it was impossible to know how deeply she was involved with what had truly made Feliks so rich.

“Thank you,” I said, just as impersonally. “You’re looking well, Karine.”

I was gratified to see a slight blush rise up the back of her neck, exposed now that her long, pale blonde hair was up in a knot atop her head. I remembered how it had been in a smooth, silky braid down her back at the dinner meeting, with a few loose strands falling down her shoulders.

“Thank you,” she murmured, not taking the opportunity to offer a flirtatious compliment back. This girl was clearly not interested, and it piqued my stubborn gene.

That’s not what you’re here for, I reminded myself.

We went through a vast patio to a large garden with several covered seating areas and a big fire pit surrounded by an outdoor kitchen. On the opposite side of a hedge, a twenty-foot-high waterfall thundered into a pool half hidden by tropical foliage. As Karine led me along the path to where her father sat at the far end of the pool, I noticed a lazy river system leading from the opposite side of the waterfall and meandering off through the property. The pool itself must have easily been a million bucks or more.

Under the cluster of palm trees, Feliks waved to us as we approached, half rising from his lounge chair. He waved for me to make myself comfortable after we shook hands, and I stroked his ego at how amazing his backyard was.

“Shall I have Esther bring the refreshments?” Karine asked her father.

“That’ll be fine, sweetie,” he said, smiling at her with the benign pride of any father.

“She’s really lovely,” I said, nodding my thanks to Karine as she walked away. “You must be so proud.”

He made a rumbling noise as his mouth twisted in a grimace. “Ahh, yes,” he sighed.

I laughed as if he’d told a hilarious joke. Early on, I’d learned that Dryga either didn’t see through sycophantic actions or just plain liked having his ass kissed. “What, having a beautiful, accomplished daughter is a bad thing?” I asked, laying on more compliments like I was spreading spackle with a trowel.

“No,” he said slowly. “It’s just that it’s past time for her to get married, and I can’t find anyone in my organization that’s suitable, or anyone on the outside, either.”

“Whoa, well, sign me up if arranged marriages are on the table,” I said, thinking we were still joking.

Feliks became deadly serious, leaning closer to me across the frosted glass table between us. “That’s how we do things in my family,” he said. “It’s the only way I can make sure she ends up with someone I trust.”

My heart raced as a new direction was suddenly opened up to me. My objective was to infiltrate the Dryga organization enough to find out their secrets, a weak point, anything to help the Morozovs run them out of Miami with minimal bloodshed. How much closer could I get than to be set up with Karine? There was no possible way I’d pull that off.

I sighed, nodding. “I wish I had someone looking out for me that way. Maybe matchmaking is the way to go.” I shrugged, leaning back. “I certainly want to settle down, but I never know who’s only interested in me for my wealth and position.”

“Then you get it,” Feliks said. A servant came with a pitcher of something ice-cold and bright red. Margaritas? Nothing like a bit of tequila to grease the wheels. I waited until Feliks poured us each a glass and took a small sip to his giant gulp. “You don’t know who to trust.”

“That you don’t,” I said. “That’s why I’ve pretty much given up on dating, even though I’d love to find a good woman and start a family soon.”

Half of that was true, because no one would consider the revolving door of different women in my life dating. As for the family? Maybe one day in the distant future. The very distant future. But Feliks didn’t have to know that.

“You’re good people, Roman,” he said. “Even though you can’t speak it for shit, I appreciate that you’re Russian, too.”

“Hey, I’m practicing,” I said in my shitty Russian, making him laugh and pour himself a refill. I held up my own drink in a toast. “Here’s to me and your daughter both finding the right person.”

He clinked his glass with mine and drained it, then gave me a shrewd stare. “We might just have more to discuss than just investments, Roman,” he said.

I grinned, my heart beating double time. “Bring it on,” I said. “I’m ready.”

Chapter 2 - Karine

Six weeks later

I sat at my dressing table, staring at my reflection in the lighted mirror. My hair had been twisted and cajoled into a style I could barely comprehend on top of my head while my cousin Elise carefully lowered the frothy net veil from above with a look of concentration as if she was performing life-saving surgery. I shifted my gaze from her hard work to the beaded neckline of my pure white gown. No ivory or eggshell for me. The satin was almost blinding in the bright makeup lights, and I reached for a tissue to dab away some of the blush Elise just finished applying to my cheeks.

“No, don’t,” she said, swatting the tissue out of my hand. “It needs to be heavier than usual to look nice in the pictures.”

“But I look like a clown in real life,” I complained, not really meaning it. I was still a bit stunned, to be fair.

“You look gorgeous,” she said, going back to scowling at the veil. She adjusted it slightly to the left and tutted. “This is all happening way too fast. Couldn’t your father wait another week for the matching veil to arrive from Italy?”

I laughed. Leave it to Elise to be more worried about the veil not being our first choice than my father forcing me to marry a complete stranger. I shrugged. The truth was I didn’t care about which veil I wore, or the fact that the dress really was lovely and cost a fortune. I didn’t care about the flowers either, even though I approved the yellow and peach roses that took up most of the garden and the peonies in my bouquet. I also didn’t care about how many important people were waiting downstairs to watch me marry some upstart from California. Why should I?

My longtime best friend barged into my room before I could assure Elise that the veil she'd managed to perch on my overdone coif was fine. The son of my father's right-hand man, Demian, had been around as long as I could remember. He was like a brother to me, and when Elise began berating him for not knocking, I just waved her complaints away. Being two years older than us, she tended to be bossy sometimes.

"It's fine," I told her, scowling when Demian pushed past her and grabbed my hand.

"It's not fine," he said, tightening his grip when I tried to pull my hand away before he tore the delicate lace glove. "Listen, Karine, you don't have to do this."

I patted his shoulder and saved my glove from his overzealous grasp. "Of course I do," I said mildly.

I was nothing if not loyal to my father and the business that would eventually all be mine one day. Ever since I could remember, I'd been told of my duties to the family. When my mother passed away when I was thirteen, I became the woman of the household, learning whatever I was allowed to at that young age. Making my father's cronies smile when I struggled to be a gracious hostess, making them cheer when I showed off my shooting and fighting skills. I held an important place in the family, and knew my duties backwards and forwards.

I also knew from a young age that I'd have little to no choice in who I married. As long as they were deemed suitable, that had to be good enough for me. It had to be good enough for everyone around me, too. I was sorry if Demian had deluded himself into thinking he ever had a chance to be my husband, but it was high time he let those foolish childhood fantasies go. I was always destined for someone with much more wealth and power than he could ever hope to have. He was a valued member of the organization, but he'd never be that important to my father.

I could tell by the wild look in his eyes that he wasn't about to let it go. "Say the word, and I'll set off one of my

bombs,” he said, the sadness showing through his brash demeanor. “Just a little one so I can whisk you away.”

I forced a laugh and squeezed his shoulder. “Oh, Demian,” I said, trying not to sound dismissive since his heartache was so clear.

I loved him, but only ever as a friend. His growing crush on me over the last few years had been starting to become an annoyance, and this rushed wedding was partly a relief. Once I was Mrs. Roman Anishin, he’d have to stop mooning over me like a high school boy.

“Why does this outsider get to marry you, Kar?” he whined. “Do you even trust this guy?”

Did I?

It was a bit odd that Papa had picked someone outside our tight little circle. Six weeks ago, Roman had come out of the woodwork with some investment opportunities, and ever since then, Papa had certainly been eating up his attention. Knowing my father had all the background on him covered, I still did a little bit of searching on my own. The company he ran with his twin brother was wildly successful, with a vast range of investments and a lot of pull with different government agencies, which was always helpful. While I could see an eager desire to make money in any way possible in Roman, he also had an outward respectability that my father, who’d been born and raised in the world of crime, craved.

Roman was Russian, which was a non-negotiable, but he was born and raised in the US. He barely spoke ten sentences in Russian and had no Bratva ties. Why would either of them jump at this arranged marriage? I had only just turned twenty-one, so surely there was time?

On Roman’s side, he was probably just trying to expand his realm, just like Papa was always doing. Wasn’t that why we’d originally come to Miami? To expand our territories

in this area? As long as Roman's ambitions didn't hurt Papa or my family, who cared if it made him richer?

Papa and Roman had been golfing, sailing, and taking meetings every other day for the last six weeks. He loved driven men like Roman, who was also gregarious and a bit of an asskisser, which never hurt. I imagined it was all a ruse, but there was no real dishonesty behind the blatant compliments. It showed he knew people and how to handle them. Would he know how to handle me?

Two weeks ago, Papa had called me into his office and announced I'd be marrying Roman right in front of the man. The smile on his handsome, chiseled face had been a bit embarrassed, which had added something human to his otherworldly good looks. It made me think I could like him and made the shock of the whole arranged marriage thing finally happening a little less severe. If only that smile had reached his dark blue eyes. The way he'd looked at me that day made it seem like he was ready to pounce.

Goosebumps had risen on my arms, bare in a strappy sundress since I'd just come home from some errands. Roman seemed to hone in on them, those intense eyes searching and seeming to be aware of everything about me. It had shaken me in a way I'd never felt before. Much more than I wanted to admit, even to myself.

So, did I trust the man I was about to vow to love, honor, and cherish from this day forward? The bottom line was I trusted my father. He always looked out for my best interests, and there was nothing I wouldn't do for him. And I would do whatever it took to advance our organization. I was every bit the soldier that Demian was. My weapons were just different. When Demian was ordered to blow something up, he did it without question.

When I was ordered to marry a complete stranger, I called up Elise and got some semblance of a wedding together in less than fourteen days.

“Of course I trust him,” I said. I didn’t like the bitterness and anger in my oldest friend’s eyes, but he’d have to get over it.

He crossed his arms over his chest, wrinkling the navy blue tie under his dark gray suit. “What do you think it’s going to be like, losing your virginity to someone you don’t know at all? Someone who’s almost twice your age?”

His crude question pissed me off, even as it raised the alarm bells I’d been hearing in my mind for the last two weeks.

“I’m sure Roman is enough of a gentleman to wait until I feel comfortable,” I said, shoving Demian out of the room before I smacked him. When I turned back to the dressing table, Elise stared anxiously at me.

“What if he’s not the gentleman he makes himself out to be?” she asked.

I didn’t have time to dwell on that genuine fear that I shared with her, or come up with a reply that showed the proper amount of courage to get her to stop acting like she was about to burst into tears. My father pounded on the door, then swung it open to beam at me.

“You’re beautiful, Karine. It’s time we get you down that aisle.”

Elise hurried ahead of me, holding onto her long bridesmaid skirt so she didn’t tumble down the stairs. Papa held his arm out, still smiling proudly. As he helped me down the stairs and along the path through the garden to where all the guests waited, I felt my knees knocking under all the voluminous satin and lace I was encased in.

The unreality of the last two weeks faded the closer we got to the long aisle, with my future husband waiting at the end of it. Was this really happening? Duty was one thing, but was this a step too far? Maybe I should have let Demian set off his little bomb and made a run for it.

I actually laughed out loud at that thought, making my father turn and give me a concerned look. If I ran, I'd be caught in less than an hour, only embarrassing myself. My father would have never forgiven me for the betrayal, and I never would have forgiven myself for my cowardice.

Of course, I was doing this.

The trip down the aisle was a blur. Whatever the priest said may as well have been in Cantonese for all I registered any of it, and before I knew it, I heard Roman say I do. Then, it was my turn to repeat all the vows and pledge myself to him. The kiss was lightning fast, the applause deafening as we ran back down the aisle.

Time started working normally again at the reception set up in our ballroom. I had to hand it to myself and Elise, and the dozen helpers we'd hired. The place looked wonderfully romantic, with all fairy lights and roses, crystal chandeliers, and pale pink velvet cushions on all the chairs. There was a live band we were lucky to get on such short notice, and my father was paying dearly for it, too. By the time the dinner was over, and it was time to dance, I actually felt somewhat relaxed. After a few minutes of the first dance with my father, Roman cut in and didn't let me go after that, no matter who tried to cut in.

The way he couldn't take his eyes off of me was flattering, and I wanted to believe it was real. Who wouldn't want to think their handsome new husband wasn't completely enamored with her? And he was so darn good-looking, it almost made me dizzy every time he flashed his smile at me. His shoulders were so broad in his perfectly tailored evening suit, his hands so strong and sure on my waist as he twirled me around the dance floor. I wanted to run my hands through his short, dark curls but didn't dare. He was still a stranger, after all.

Oh, he was perfectly charming, just like he was on the three dates we went on during our whirlwind two-week-long betrothal. Just like then, he kept trying to engage me in

conversation, but now, with his hands roaming up and down my back, it was even harder to let my guard down and answer him. It was a curse being shy. If my father hadn't arranged this marriage for me, I might have ended up an old maid.

"What's that look for?" Roman asked, leaning down close to me.

"What look?" I asked, feeling my cheeks heat up as I felt his warm breath on my neck.

We were married now and had kissed exactly one time. The chaste peck when the priest gave his permission. I really wanted another one. Anything to break this terrible tension I didn't understand but was coursing through me like a fever.

He leaned back, grinning down at me. Just then, the music changed to a slow song, and he pulled me close. I was happy to lean against him to catch my breath, which was short both from exertion and the way he'd been looking at me.

"You had this look like you were thinking, 'Oh, shit.' You can admit it if you were." His teasing tone helped me relax; at the same time, the way his hands kept creeping lower against my back was making the tension rise.

"No, I wasn't thinking that," I said. "It was probably worse, actually."

"Oh, now you have to admit what it was."

I shook my head, but his cajoling smile finally got me to speak. "I was thinking I was lucky my father set this up, or I'd probably have ended up dying alone."

He actually skipped a step, faltering in our rhythmic swaying. He shook his head, pulling me tighter against his big, hard body. "No way. There's no way that would happen, Karine. I'm the lucky one."

Was he just buttering me up the way he did with my father? I leaned back to search his face, having no way to be sure, since I didn't know his signals. His dark eyes were unreadable, but he didn't look away, and his hands tightened

on my waist. Unwanted tears rose in my eyes—purely from the stress of planning the wedding and exhaustion from being up since the crack of dawn putting the finishing touches on everything. I would have rather taken a direct punch than have him see it, so I nestled my face against his chest and let out a long sigh.

“You’re tired,” he said, leading me off the dance floor.

Okay, this was a good start. Maybe I couldn’t read him, but he could at least tell that much about me.

We settled down at our table, where we accepted everyone’s well wishes and congratulations. I asked him why his brother hadn’t come to the wedding, and he frowned.

“He wanted to be here more than anything, but it was just too quick. He couldn’t get away from a conference in Tokyo that he was speaking at.”

“Are you two identical?” I asked.

“Yes, but he’s like a hippie version of me. Longer hair, more laid back.”

“You seem pretty laid back. I mean, you agreed to marry a complete stranger.”

He turned to me sharply. “If you want to know why I married you, just ask, Karine.” He laughed, a harsh sound that didn’t match his smile. “I know why you married me, but aren’t you the least bit curious what’s in it for me?”

I felt my face getting hot and I scowled at him. “You don’t know why I agreed to marry you at all,” I said.

The laugh was even harsher this time. “I don’t? How about because you had to.”

There was so much more to it than that, but could he ever understand what absolute loyalty was? “Why did you agree to marry me, then?” I asked.

His face relaxed, and he scooted his chair closer to mine. Leaning over so his lips were only an inch from my ear,

he reached up and moved some loose strands of hair that had escaped their updo behind my shoulder. His breath was hot, like the fingers that slid down the side of my throat and followed the low curve of my beaded neckline. I swallowed hard and asked him again, dying for the answer and dreading it at the same time.

“Why?” I asked. It had to be the strangest question for any bride to have to ask, but that was my life.

I felt his mouth curl into a slow smile as he nuzzled my earlobe. “Because you’re the most intoxicating woman I’ve ever seen,” he said in a low growl. “The second I saw you pull up to that restaurant wearing that baby blue top and skin-tight skirt, I was lost. You could have been Feliks’s assistant or trophy wife for all I cared, because I knew I had to have you.” He pulled back with a grin, leaving me shaking. “Imagine when I found out you were his only daughter. What a kick in the balls that was.”

Was he joking? Was it a joke, and I was supposed to laugh? Having his lips teasing my sensitive earlobe robbed me of the ability to do anything but stare at him. I finally forced out a laugh.

“Well, here we are anyway,” I said.

No one had ever affected me this way. Yes, I found it hard to be comfortable around strangers, but I wasn’t an idiot. I could hold a conversation despite being shy. There was something about Roman that ramped everything up to such heights I could barely see straight.

“Yes, baby, here we are.”

I was going to force myself to relax and throw myself into the game, whatever game this was, when Demian strolled over and grabbed my hand. “Let’s dance,” he said, pulling me out of my chair.

I pulled my hand away and swiveled to see Roman’s reaction to this stupid display of Demian’s. All I needed was for my new husband to have a jealous streak. Was I actually

hoping he had a jealous streak? He only shrugged, looking mildly amused as he nodded toward the dance floor.

“Go and have a good time,” he said.

I was exhausted and would have declined, but his casual acceptance of being tugged along by another man stung. As Demian swung me around to the fast beat, I realized Roman wasn't jealous because he didn't think he had any reason to be. Demian was tall and wiry, preferring running and swimming to any other form of exercise, while Roman was a pure wall of thick, burly muscle. But it wasn't just that. Confidence radiated off of him while Demian had the sour pout of a disappointed toddler on his face.

For the first time, it was clear to me how very young my best friend seemed compared to Roman, who was all man. Did he see me as silly and childish as I currently viewed Demian? I got a shiver of fear at the thought of being alone with Roman. And sooner than later, since the reception was winding down and people would expect us to be the first to leave.

“Oh my God, I'm so confused,” I muttered, too low for Demian to hear over the loud music. I'd been shivering with anticipation at Roman's proximity not three minutes ago, and now I was terrified to be alone with him.

“It's not too late,” Demian said, pulling me much too close for comfort.

Not caring that I danced with him was one thing, but if Roman saw him clinging onto me like that, who knew what could happen. I shoved away midsong, pissed that he couldn't be the friend I needed right now.

“I'm too tired to dance anymore,” I said. “And it's time for me to go home soon anyway.”

Demian's hand snaked out and grabbed mine, keeping me from leaving the dance floor. “Bought and paid for, just like the last shipment we got down at the docks,” he hissed, dropping my hand like it was something dirty.

I sat back down beside Roman, trying not to show how much I was burning up with anger at Demian's rude crack, and trying more than anything not to believe it was true.

Roman leaned over, putting his hand on my cheek as he nodded toward someone with a camera. "They want pictures," he said, moving to kiss me.

"Not now," I said, if nothing more than to prove Demian wrong and that I wasn't Roman's property.

His hand slid from my cheek to the back of my neck, pulling me roughly closer to him. His mouth covered mine, his firm lips hard on mine until his tongue eased between them as he kept a firm grip on my neck.

"Great, perfect," the photographer called, but it was several more seconds before Roman let me go.

I sat there shaking and trying to catch my breath. My lips tingled, and I could still feel the hot pressure points on my neck where he'd so easily held me. He stood, his teeth clenched as he smiled and announced it was time to get his bride home.

Everyone laughed and cheered, following us out front where our getaway car waited, covered in streamers and soap messages on the windows announcing the happy newlywed couple. Roman's big hand was around mine as he led me to it and opened the passenger door for me. The sound of the door closing rang out as it doused the sounds of the guests, and I watched Roman jog around the front of the car to join me.

All I could think about was what lay ahead. Was Roman the gentleman that I had hoped he was? I wasn't so sure anymore. If he'd force a kiss in front of family and friends, what would he do when we were alone together on what he considered his honeymoon night?

Chapter 3 - Roman

I couldn't stop smiling the entire drive from the circus of a wedding thrown at Feliks's Taj Mahal complex to the only slightly more demure mansion he'd bought us as a wedding gift. At first I'd unequivocally refused it. That wasn't how I rolled. I just always paid my own way for everything, since my first part-time job at thirteen to help put food on the table. But Feliks had insisted, saying we were family now, and I didn't want him to go back on his offer of his daughter.

The two weeks of our engagement I felt like I was walking on eggshells, expecting everything to come tumbling down around my ears. I was certain that Feliks had done an investigation on me, probably after our very first meeting when I pitched him the investment opportunity of a lifetime. There was nothing that traced me back to the Morozovs so it had been easy to dupe my enemy. Our enemy, since I was doing this for my newfound family. Still, I couldn't quite believe my luck, even with the knot firmly tied. It was a good thing Feliks Dryga was so damn greedy and couldn't resist adding my fortune to his own.

As we pulled into the private drive leading up to our new home, I snuck a peek at said daughter, my new bride. Right after the ceremony she had changed out of the poofy dress that nearly ate her alive into a simpler, more form-fitting white gown. She seemed so stunned after the vows were over I didn't think she registered one of her female family members leading her back up the stairs. She didn't seem to come around to realizing where she was until we were dancing.

At first I thought she was going to thaw a little, might have even gotten a little response when I got right up close and told her I thought she was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen. Not a lie, and instead of getting the desired result, the scrawny kid who'd been staring at her with sad cow eyes the entire evening came over and hauled her onto the dance floor.

I might have decked him if she hadn't looked as annoyed at the kid as I felt.

The headlights hit the front of our big, modern style mansion, reflecting off the high windows to make her turn her head and catch me staring at her. I kept my smile in place and she offered me a weak one in return. God, she really was so very beautiful, with all her long blonde hair falling out of its complicated style, her cheeks rosy from sipping wine and dancing.

We headed up the porch stairs and at the last second I swept her into my arms to carry her over the threshold. At first she went completely stiff, then relaxed, even giggling. I liked the feel of her lush curves under the thin, slippery fabric of her dress, and the glimpse of her long legs when the skirt rode up her thighs had me hard in an instant.

No, I really couldn't believe my good luck. I was in. How long would it take to find the information necessary to help dismantle the Dryga organization so I could hand it all over on a silver platter to my father? Getting to bed Karine the ice princess was the icing on the cake. If only she'd stop looking so miserable.

We'd been having a good time while we danced and talked at the reception. Things had only gone south when the kid—Demian, the one who'd been staring at her, had come and pulled her onto the dance floor. Then she'd gone from warm and friendly to chilly all over again.

Well, damn. Had I broken up a young couple in love? Good. I wanted nothing less than complete and total annihilation of the Dryga organization. It was the best and fastest way to prove myself.

“Why don't you run up and get ready for bed?” I suggested, pulling out my phone. “I need to catch up with my brother. It'll be midmorning in Japan, so it's a good time to reach him.”

The cover story I'd given of Sergei being unable to get out of speaking at a conference had been half true. He was currently in Tokyo, but if this wedding had been real, nothing could have kept him from being my best man. He thought the whole plan was foolhardy and was refusing to acknowledge I was legally married, which I supposed was for the best since it would eventually have to end.

"Okay," she said softly and scurried up the wide, curving staircase.

I watched her, my hands curling in anticipation of claiming my sweet bride. Settling in the kitchen to give her a little privacy to take a shower and slip into whatever sexy nightie she had planned, I assessed what I knew about Karine. We'd been on three awkward dates since the engagement was announced and she had been polite and charming enough, but far too quiet to really learn anything about her. Anything I could get out of her was fairly surface level.

All I really could glean from her was that she was completely loyal to her father. A Dryga, through and through. If she figured out who I really was, she'd put a bullet through my skull without batting her pretty green eyes. It was important I keep it in the back of my mind at all times that she was every bit the enemy that Feliks was, despite her fresh face and inviting curves.

Sergei didn't answer my call, so I left him a brief message telling him it was done and he'd have to talk to me eventually. Then I headed upstairs to find Karine standing in front of the foggy bathroom mirror, steam still rolling out of the giant marble shower. She was wrapped in a fluffy black towel that matched the sleek, modern fixtures, and I was drawn to her like a hapless moth to the only light source for miles around.

Standing behind her, I drew her close to me, her plump ass nestling irresistibly against my already stiffening cock. She held herself just as stiffly, gripping the sink in front of her.

“You really are so damn beautiful, Karine,” I said. That was the truth and there was no denying it.

She snorted and shrugged free of my arms locked around her shoulders, heading out into the bedroom. My ego was dented and continued to sting even after a bracing shower. When I joined her in the bedroom, she was curled up in an oversized white armchair, wearing a slinky nightgown that made me forget everything while causing my blood to race in my veins. Straight downward.

“I’m sorry for being rude,” she said begrudgingly, looking up at me with her face scrubbed free from all the wedding makeup.

I ambled over to her side and reached for her hand, which she slowly held out to me. “Don’t even think about it,” I said, pulling her off the chair and back into my arms where she belonged. “Everything’s happening so fast.”

“Yes, about that,” she said, hiding her face against my chest.

I tipped up her chin and tried to look reassuring. Tried not to get lost in her eyes. “You’re mine now, Karine,” I said, lowering my mouth to hers.

She slithered out of my grasp like a minnow. “I think I’d feel more comfortable sleeping apart for the first few nights,” she said, biting her lower lip. Her chest rose in a deep breath, pushing her breasts up against the lace edge of her nightgown and pushing my patience to the breaking point.

I gently tugged her back, running my hands down her back in the way that had made her lean closer to me while we’d been dancing. “That doesn’t seem like a very good start,” I said, hoping to change her mind.

She leaned against me, swaying along to my movements as I caressed her smooth back, all the way down to the curve of her ass. When I cupped her, she sighed and tipped her head back, her eyes fluttering closed. I leaned down to take her mouth and she jerked back with a gasp.

“I’d rather—”

Tired of her games, I jerked her close, pinning her soft body to mine. “You’re my wife now,” I reminded her. “And this is our honeymoon.”

The next thing I knew, I was flat on my back with Karine on top of me, her closed fist hurtling toward my face. I was able to turn in time to save my nose but she punched me hard in the jaw, pulling back for another in quick succession, then leaning her elbow on my throat.

I was stunned at her fighting skill and the fact she took me so completely by surprise. A little bit impressed and more than a little turned on.

“If you try to force things before I’m ready, I’ll be your widow, because I’ll kill you,” she hissed, leaning harder on my throat. “You wanted to be in a mafia family, so this is what you get.”

I didn’t think telling her how cute she was would de-escalate and I could barely get air through my windpipe which she was currently crushing. There was nothing left but to get the upper hand so I quickly flipped her off me and onto her back. Grabbing her wrists before she could punch me again, I pinned them to the plush carpet and straddled her to keep her legs from thrashing.

Her green eyes flared as I leaned down and kissed her, forcing her lips open and sweeping my tongue between them. She bucked underneath me, then softened, sighing as she melted against me and gave herself over to the kiss. I let her hands go and she ran her fingers through my hair, opening her mouth to me. I never expected our shared passion to ignite quickly and burn hot.

Agonizing pain ripped through my groin as she brought her knee up hard and fast, shoving my shoulders away at the same time. Jumping to her feet, she stared down at me, passion replaced by fury.

“I said I’d feel more comfortable sleeping apart for the first few nights,” she said, turning on her heel and marching toward the door.

Where in the hell had this Karine come from? “I thought you were sweet,” I croaked, curling up and trying to get past the worst of the pain.

Did I hear her laugh at me as she yanked open the door? “Welcome to the Bratva,” she called, slamming it behind her.

Chapter 4 - Karine

My heart pounded as I scrambled out of the master bedroom and into the next one down the hall, locking the door behind me and leaning against it until I caught my breath. I slid to the floor and put my head against my knees, flexing my aching hand.

Oh my God, I just beat the crap out of my new husband. Would this be the shortest marriage in history? Would I make some kind of record book? When I was finally able to get my heart rate under control, I stood up and made my way to the bed, flopping on top of the covers and staring at the closed door as if it might explode inward at any second, which it very well might have.

Was Roman going to come after me?

Did I want him to?

Kicking angrily at the midnight blue tufted bedspread, I got under the linen sheets and propped myself against the pillows, too wired to begin to think about sleep. I was furious with myself for losing control, for wanting Roman so badly even when he'd been such a complete ass. Confusion about how he could have gotten under my skin so quickly warred with the confusion about how he could so easily drive me so wild.

God, I'd really wanted him. It was part of why I'd put on the honeymoon negligee when my brain screamed at me to put on sweats. I loved the feel of his mouth claiming mine, the way his rock-hard body had pushed against me in all the right places. That was all perfectly fine, since he was my husband now.

So why was I locked up all alone after kicking the stuffing out of him? A groan seeped out of me, full of embarrassment and regret.

If only I could get Demian's cruel words about being bought and paid for, no better than any shipment of goods, out of my head. None of that was true, was it?

Duty and loyalty were two traits I prided myself in having. My father had always given me everything and he'd do anything for me, and the same went for me. If he'd asked me to marry a toothless old drunk who reeked of cabbage, I would have done it without question. Because that was how much I loved and trusted my father. How much I would do for the betterment of our family business.

And he hadn't ordered me to marry a stinky old drunk but had instead fixed me up with a man he had to have seen me eyeing with interest. There was no way not to notice how handsome Roman Anishin was, and there was no way Papa didn't notice my attraction to him. If Roman hadn't also been as successful and useful as he was, then the wedding would have never happened, but the fact it did was still an apparent effort on Papa's part to make sure I was happy, wasn't it?

I wasn't just a commodity, was I? Now that everything was so real, and I was alone with that big, virile man who both scared and enraged me as well as ignited me in a way I never dreamed possible, my absolute loyalty didn't seem so cut and dried.

If I gave in too easily to Roman, I might be setting myself up to be under a tyrant's thumb for the rest of my life. And I so wanted a happy marriage where I was an equal to my husband. That was why I was locked in here by myself.

There had to be a balance of power and this was my small way of getting some of my own, even if it meant ignoring my very real desire. The more I worked it out in my head, the more my extreme mortification turned back into anger at Roman's actions. That was a lot easier to deal with than unbridled lust, anyway. Just because I was his wife now, didn't mean he owned me. Just because the way he declared I was his made me shiver and gave me an ache between my thighs didn't mean I had to jump at his every whim.

I had some say in things and meant for them to be heard.

The longer I stared at the door, the more unreasonably angry I got that Roman wasn't pounding it down and demanding what was his. What was wrong with me? Did I want him to come in here, or did I want him to respect the boundaries I'd requested? Hell, the boundaries I had demanded with my fists.

I laughed out loud at the ridiculousness of it all, and chalked it up to the long wedding day and the weeks of harried preparation leading up to it. Not totally sure why, I got out of bed and unlocked the door, listening with my ear pressed to it for a few seconds. Nothing. He was probably already fast asleep. I crawled back into the big guest bed, half wishing he'd come after me. Snapping off the bedside table light, I curled up under the covers and eventually fell asleep, alone on my honeymoon night.

The next morning when I woke up, still alone, I didn't know how to feel about it. I had to face Roman eventually, and it was probably better to get it over with as soon as possible. There was no clock in the guest bedroom, but the light outside the window showed it was at least midmorning. I must have slept like a log after being sleep-deprived.

Thankfully, he wasn't in the master bedroom when I peeked around the door, and I hurried to get dressed, picking out a simple pair of shorts and a tank top. The look didn't say anything in particular, not like putting on the slinky nightgown did last night. Still, I wanted to look nice, so I took a few minutes to brush out the tangled mess on top of my head, quickly braiding it. Then I found my overnight bag and dug out my makeup, and dabbed on some blush and lip gloss. At that point I was truly dawdling, nervous about how he'd react when we faced each other again.

"Time to eat crow," I muttered.

Downstairs, I found Roman sitting at the long granite bar in the open-plan kitchen, his face turned away as he calmly

ate a plate of scrambled eggs while he listened to a phone call. He swiped at a tablet while he answered whoever was on the call, then aimed his fork at the eggs again. Such simple movements, yet I was mesmerized by the way his forearms rippled when he reached for his coffee, along with the way his t-shirt stretched across his bulging biceps. The man was ripped.

He barely glanced at me before getting up, still talking on the phone as he went out the sliding door into the garden. Okay, fair enough. He was on a call, and maybe an important one he couldn't interrupt. I poked through the refrigerator and pantry, then the cupboards, trying to get acclimated to my new home that had been furnished and completely stocked by people my father hired. They'd asked me my preferences for fabrics and colors, but I'd been so busy with the wedding that I'd told them to just make it nice.

And they had. The kitchen had gleaming stainless steel appliances, and the granite was a warm cream color that worked well with the dark wooden cabinets. The kitchen table and chairs were simple and sleek but with cheerful, bright red cushions that matched the framed poppy paintings on the walls. I pulled a loaf of bread from the pantry which was an organizer's dream full of glass jars and neatly labeled drawers. Might as well make toast while I waited to grovel to my husband.

I fully expected him to return and finish his breakfast when his call ended, but he never did. Never even walked through the kitchen again. I dropped my toast onto the plate, mildly irritated that he didn't give me the chance to apologize for kicking his ass. I wasn't even sure I was the one who should be apologizing.

I had to fight the almost overwhelming urge to seek him out and force him to listen to my apology, but decided not to rock the boat. It was a massive house but I figured we'd have to cross paths again eventually. I spent half the day poking around in the different rooms, loving most of the decor, but making a few mental notes about things that I'd eventually

want to change. The library, stocked from floor to ceiling with all my favorite books and ones I hoped to read soon, was definitely going to be a favorite place. It struck me I didn't even know if Roman liked to read at all, let alone if we had the same taste in books.

I was just settling into one of the comfy leather couches with a classic in my hands when I heard him out in the hallway. Bracing myself for whatever happened, I strolled out, trying to make it look like it was a coincidence we were meeting.

“Oh, hello,” I said, cringing at the awkwardness that dripped from those two words.

“I'm going out for work,” he grunted, pulling a jacket from the closet in the foyer.

I followed him toward the front door. “I thought you took time off for our honeymoon,” I said. Taking calls was one thing, but was he really leaving me already? For the office of all things?

He stopped, turning to raise an eyebrow at me, then gave me a long look that sent one of those frighteningly delicious shivers down my spine.

“Are we on our honeymoon?” he asked expectantly, voice full of challenge.

My throat closed up. “I guess do whatever you have to do,” I squeaked, holding my breath. Not sure what I'd do if he reached for me, but hoping he would. Then we could start over and quit being so weird.

Talk about uncomfortable. There was a tense moment of silence before he shrugged and left. Just swung open the door and walked out.

“When will you be back?” I called, unable to stop myself and hating how desperate I sounded.

“Why do you care?” he tossed over his shoulder, not looking back and continuing out the door.

Chapter 5 - Roman

Waking up alone with a sore face the day after my wedding wasn't part of the plan, but I rolled with it. I still had work to do with my own business and went downstairs and made myself some scrambled eggs, wondering if the noise I was making by clattering the pans around and the smell of the food would get Karine to come downstairs.

When she didn't, I settled in to eat, trying not to stew on the complete mess that was last night. Setting up my tablet to the current stock market exchange, I hungrily shoveled in a big bite of eggs. Then grimaced. My jaw was still tender from where she decked me, not to mention my other parts. Even through the pain I had to chuckle.

Karine wasn't at all what I expected or assumed, based on our few dates. So she had some fire under all that ice, after all. Good. Now that I knew it was there, it would make it all the sweeter to break that wild spirit of hers when I had crushed her father under my heel.

Halfway through my breakfast, I got on a call with one of my business associates, a man who'd been with Sergei and me almost since the beginning, and who would have understood if I hung up on him abruptly. Which I was fully prepared to do when Karine finally slunk into the kitchen, wearing denim shorts and a top that shouldn't have drawn my eyes directly to the curves of her breasts under the flowy fabric, but it did. I knew far too much about that body of hers, and wanted to know much more.

Since she'd apologized the night before for being mildly snippy, I fully expected her to apologize again for getting the jump on me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her gaze skate over me, and she closed her arms protectively around her middle, looking away. So she was deliberately going to ignore me? Two could play that game, then.

Instead of ending my call, I kept my eye on her for a second, still giving her a chance to make a movement, a slight smile, any sign. Of course, I could have done the same, but I wasn't the one who'd kicked me in the nuts last night, was I?

She continued to curl in around herself as she edged toward the refrigerator, as if I was a snake about to strike.

Fine. I got up and went outside, never faltering in my phone conversation. Was I trying to make her feel more comfortable? And if so, why? Besides the obvious fact that watching her tight little ass sway in those shorts was driving me crazy with lust that I didn't want her to notice. I finished up my few business calls while wandering around the vast property, ducking under palm fronds and following the pebble path that led around the perimeter and ending up back at the pool. Our pool wasn't quite as extravagant as Feliks's, but it still had a waterfall with a hidden grotto behind it.

Actually, jumping into the inviting water with my clothes on and doing about thirty hard laps might be just the thing to get out all my pent-up frustration. That, or go back inside and confront my wife. It wasn't hellishly hot under all the shade from the dozens of trees on the property, so I spent the rest of the morning outside. Because I liked the scent of all the jasmine and magnolia flowers, or because I was avoiding Karine? I had to admit I might not be able to completely control myself around her, warring between wanting to pick another fight to ignite that hidden fire, or pull her against me again so I could feel her melt.

By the time I got back in the house, she was no longer in the kitchen and the few dishes, along with the pan I'd used for the eggs, were washed and stacked in the wire rack, a towel neatly folded underneath it to protect the granite.

Oh hell no. I wasn't going to feel a stab of guilt. So she was a dutiful homemaker. Maybe she was just a neat freak. It had nothing to do with me, and with how worked up I was with the constant visions of her body in her slinky honeymoon

nightgown, it was imperative I continue to stay away from her, at least for the rest of the day.

It turned out she must have had the same idea, if not for the same reasons, because she wasn't in our room, or the one she'd hid out in. I packed up my laptop to head over to my apartment, which I'd kept since I still hadn't gone looking for a proper office yet. I made a racket in the front hall, pretending to look for an umbrella in the foyer closet, still not sure why I was trying to flush her out when we'd both seemed to somehow agree that ignoring each other for the rest of the day was for the best.

She flung herself out of the library, blinking in surprise to see me getting ready to go out, then quickly tried to casually pretend she was just on her way upstairs. It was actually kind of cute. My eyes skated down her body, her smooth, bare legs seeming to go on forever, her toes painted a soft pink.

"I'm going out for work," I snapped, my fingers itching to reach for her.

She frowned and asked why, reminding me we were on our honeymoon. That was hilarious. I took a step toward her, ready to reach for her waist to sink my fingers into her soft, inviting flesh.

"*Are we on our honeymoon?*" I asked. Challenging her, and hopeful as hell. Yes, I had plenty more calls to make and reports I could look over. But if she was offering, I was going to take it. And keep taking.

Her pretty face blanched and she closed off, telling me I should do what I had to do. Shaking my head, I stormed out, laughing under my breath when she had the nerve to ask when I'd be back.

I asked her the obvious question. "Why do you care?"

Taking the slightest pause in the doorway, there was no answer, so I kept going, fuming the whole way to my apartment. There was a missed call from Sergei, so as soon as I had an ice cold beer in my hand, I called him back. I wasn't

kidding myself that I'd get any more work done that day. Karine had done a number on my concentration.

He brushed off my greeting, launching into a tirade. "I found out some things you need to know," he said. I could hear traffic noise in the distance and the babble of unfamiliar language floating around.

"Still in Tokyo?" I asked.

It was clear by the tense sound of his voice he wasn't going to fill me in on how the conference had gone. And I frankly didn't want to hear anything else from him about my arranged marriage.

"Listen, Roman, I dug up some stuff about your new family—"

"Which one?" I interrupted. "The one you're equal part of and refuse to accept?"

His annoyed rumble told me he didn't want to hear anything about that. I didn't give a shit about him not showing up for my sham marriage, but it bothered me that he still wouldn't have anything to do with Oleg, or any of the Morozovs. He'd dismissed them as completely as if they didn't exist.

"You could at least shoot Oleg off an email," I said. "He's dying to get to know you. And he's not in the best of health, you know. I think you'd feel like crap if—"

"Stop," he said, loud enough that the voices in the background went silent for a second. "Damn it," he murmured lower. "I'm out on the terrace of a coffee shop and you're making me look like a loud American."

"Isn't it the middle of the night over there?" I asked.

"It's the crack of dawn, and I'm actually working."

I reeled off the number of calls I made that morning. "Even on my honeymoon, I'm getting more work done than you," I teased.

His laugh was humorless. “Yeah, about that. I found out more about the Drygas. They’re killers, Roman. Down to the least important lackey in their crew. What in the hell do you think you’re risking your life for? Some stranger?”

My laugh was bitter. “I know exactly what the Drygas are capable of. And Oleg isn’t a stranger.”

“The fact he could put you in such a situation shows he’s not a father, either. You’ve got to snap out of this fantasy that you’re part of some big, happy family, Roman. They’re criminals. And frankly, it’s an insult to Mom’s memory.”

Even though we teased each other mercilessly, I rarely told my brother to fuck off and mean it. I meant it now.

“Fuck all the way off with that,” I spat. “Don’t ever say I’m disrespecting her.”

“She ran from him for a reason.”

“He was honest about them not really being in love, and sure. Okay. She didn’t want to be part of the Bratva—”

“Jesus, how can you throw around those words like you’re already one of them,” he said.

His voice was full of despair that twisted my guts. I didn’t like being on the outs with my twin, but as pissed off as he was at me, I was equally angry that he wouldn’t even meet our father. But we were about to start going around in the same endless circles we’d been going in since he found that folder among our mother’s things. He’d either come around or he wouldn’t, and I couldn’t let it distract me from the mission I’d committed myself to.

“Not doing this right now,” I said, rubbing my eyes. “Let me know when you’re back in LA so we can coordinate our schedules.”

After a long silence, Sergei said, “Be careful, man.”

We hung up, not really in a fight, but not on the best of terms, either. Taking my sweaty Tecate bottle, I headed toward the balcony to get some fresh air. My reflection in the glass

door was tense, my hair standing on end from repeatedly running my hand over it in frustration the entire day. I saw Sergei's face staring back at me, not angry, but worried. He didn't understand.

We might look identical, but we really couldn't be more different. My brother needed to stay on the straight and narrow path and follow every regulation. He couldn't even look at our tax returns because he suspected, rightly, that I had our accountants tweak whatever they could to get us the best deals. Never outside the law, but close enough to the edge that it made him queasy.

Now, I didn't mind bending the rules. I found it invigorating, in fact. Between us, we'd made our business more prosperous than our wildest dreams. And maybe he was somewhat right. Now that I knew we had a father out there who wanted to be in our lives, I wanted more than just our vast riches. The houses, the vacations, the slick gold watches and cars that turned heads, wasn't enough for me anymore. Now that I saw a glimpse of what a big, happy, close-knit family looked like, I wanted to be a part of it. I'd never blame my mother for her choices and doing what she thought was right, but now I wanted what I'd been denied for so long. No matter what it took.

And it took marrying Karine Dryga. God, I'd really done it. If it turned out to be a long game, we might be expected to produce an heir. Feliks was definitely the type who'd want a soccer team's worth of grandkids to show off and mold in his image.

Thinking about Karine holding a baby—our baby—in her arms, running and playing with a golden-haired toddler on the white sand beaches, gave me an oddly warm feeling. I quickly shoved it away. That wasn't the kind of family I was looking for. If that was what I was after, I could have been married a dozen times by now with how women threw themselves at me.

If and when I ever brought a child into this world, it was going to be the real thing, not part of a revenge plot.

The blazing hot sun and the sounds wafting up to me from the beach below mellowed my bad mood. I couldn't hide out here forever and the merest thought of Karine had stirred me up again.

It might be a good idea to switch tactics with her. Perhaps I'd catch more flies with honey. Sure, I could force my hand and she'd eventually capitulate, being the good little soldier that she was. But that wasn't what I wanted. Ultimately it would be a lot more fun to make her fall hopelessly in love with me. A brokenhearted ice queen would be an added bonus when this was all over.

I stopped at one of the restaurants that we'd gone to on one of our dates, ordering the same meal she'd raved about then, to bring home as an olive branch. She must have heard the car pull up to the front of the house, because she was waiting in the foyer when I came in. Before she saw the restaurant takeout bag in my hand, she stepped forward, tentatively holding out her hand.

"I'm sorry about last night. I never should have lost control like that."

I snickered, charmed by the way her cheeks turned red with her heartfelt apology. "You seemed in perfect control," I told her, making her turn a deeper shade of scarlet. "And you have nothing to be sorry about. I was out of pocket."

Her smile lit up her eyes and she took another step forward. This was what I wanted, to get on her good side and gain her trust. Who knew what kind of secrets she'd spill once I got her to really open up. Secrets that might speed up my plan.

And God, I really wanted her. Still in her shorts and flowy top, her hair had once again worked partly out of its braid to frame her face and float around her shoulders. I held

up the takeout and her smile grew wider, recognizing it as what it was meant to be. An apology of my own.

Taking her hand, I led her into the kitchen, not wanting to bother with the long, formal dining room. I wanted to keep her close.

“How was your day?” she asked, smirking at the banality of it as she pulled plates from the cupboard.

“Productive.” I grabbed the forks and knives and met her at the table where I began doling out the portions of Cuban Mojo chicken with the side of fried plantains that had about made her eyes roll back in her head on our date.

“You remembered,” she whispered, sitting down.

I leaned over and smoothed a strand of hair off her cheek. Her skin was like silk. “My wife’s favorite meal? Of course I did.”

Her blush returned and I got her to tell me about her day, which she said she mostly spent reading in the library, then asked me about my favorite books.

Hell, I hadn’t read for pleasure since high school. Just too busy building our empire. I told her the last book I read, which was some biography of an ancient Chinese king—mostly to have something to talk about at a dinner party on my most recent trip to Beijing. She seemed sincerely interested and said she’d look for it.

Before she could start clearing away the dishes, I jumped up and brought them to the sink, earning another smile. I made a mental note to find out if staff came with the place, and if not, to hire a few people so neither one of us had to get into one-upping each other with the chores. I could think of a dozen more fun ways to use up our energy.

“How about we go out dancing?” I suggested when the dishes were washed and she’d dried them and put them away. I grabbed her and pulled her close, swirling her around the kitchen. “I know you’ve got moves from the reception. You can’t hide it.”

“Okay,” she said eagerly.

When I mentioned the name of the club I’d been wanting to try, her face darkened, and she pulled out of my loose grip. Once again ice cold. “That club belongs to one of the Morozovs,” she said.

Shit. I should have done my homework. But I had so many new cousins that I couldn’t possibly know every little thing they had a hand in. “What’s a Morozov?” I asked, cringing inwardly at having to feign stupidity.

She sighed deeply. “They’re our rivals. They think they own the entire city, and to be fair, they own a lot of it. For now. They’re a constant thorn in our side.”

“Well then, we don’t want to go where our enemies are. Somewhere else?”

She smiled, maybe because I’d included myself against their enemies, and I relaxed. Her smile grew more devious. “No. It’s supposed to be a great club, and we should put up a public show of strength to let them know we’re just as important around here.”

“Is that going to be safe?” I asked.

She shrugged. “You want to be part of this life, don’t you? You can’t let anyone think you’re weak just because you weren’t raised in it.”

“Hell no,” I said, pulling her close again. “Just so long as you’re safe, baby.”

“I’ll have my father send over plenty of bodyguards,” she teased.

At least I thought she was teasing. I was half amused and half terrified by her bloodthirsty glee to go mingle with the enemy. “What are the chances of a gunfight breaking out?” I asked.

She laughed delightedly and pulled away, still giggling as she ran upstairs to get ready. Once she was in the shower, I

took out my hidden, secret phone and messaged Evelina to let her know what we were doing.

Maybe ask our cousins not to instantly start shooting.

She replied with a string of laughing emojis. What was up with these Bratva women? Was I the only one worried about getting killed just so I could show my crazy wife a good time?

Chapter 6 - Karine

So maybe things were working out all right, after all. It seemed like Roman had fully accepted my apology, and perhaps even meant to subtly make one of his own, by bringing home that meal from my favorite restaurant.

So the first night of our marriage was a bust, but after the mostly easy conversation we had during dinner, maybe the second one would be better. Ever since he pulled me into his arms and twirled me around, I was more than ready to give it another shot. The feel of his rock-hard chest and the way he so effortlessly pulled me to and fro made me weak in the knees all over again and I couldn't wait to get close to him on the dance floor.

Even if it was the foul Morozov's club, I wanted to show off my new husband and have a little fun. Pretend this was a normal marriage and that we were really as in love as any newlywed. Pretend normalcy was all I had, so I was clinging to it.

While I got ready, I arranged with my father to have a few bodyguards meet us there, even though I didn't think anything would really happen. Despite the quiet war our families were waging, it was still their place of business, open to the innocent public. Neither of us were savages. If they were offended by our appearance there, they might seek to retaliate later, but surely not with hundreds of bystanders as witnesses.

"Whose idea was it to go to that club?" my father asked.

"Roman," I told him honestly. "He's more than ready to prove he has what it takes."

"But still send bodyguards."

We both laughed. "I like teasing him," I admitted.

“I’m glad you’re happy so far, Karine,” Papa said. “I don’t think this is a good idea, but the men will be there by the time you arrive.”

All teasing aside, I wasn’t completely convinced Roman would be able to cut it if shit really did hit the fan at Morozov’s club, and Roman didn’t deserve to get hurt because I wanted to flaunt my handsome husband under our enemies’ noses.

I chose a tight white dress that I knew would gleam under the lights and stand out from the sea of other women wearing little black numbers. The halter top showed off my shoulders and I tugged it down to reveal just a bit more cleavage, then slipped into teetering high-heeled sandals and headed downstairs.

Roman was waiting for me, looking mouth-watering in dark jeans and a black shirt that was open at the collar. His eyes bugged out when he saw me and I couldn’t hide my self-satisfied smile, because yes, I’d wanted to see that appreciative look on his face.

“Are you going to punch me again if I compliment you?” he asked, making me laugh.

“I’ll allow it,” I told him.

“Then you look amazing, Karine. Sexy as hell.”

I stood on my toes, even in my heels he was still taller than me, and tipped my head back, hoping for a kiss. He obliged, but it was much too short. Then he took my hand and led me out to the waiting car. Things were going perfectly, just like I imagined a real couple in love would act.

Before the slight sadness that we weren’t really in love hit me full force, I pushed it back. There was time, and going out and having fun could only help things along. I was determined to make this night a good one.

The club was packed, with two levels of seating all around and a massive dance floor in the middle. Lights flashed and music pounded, making me eager to get out there. Roman

was right, I did love to dance. It was one of the few times I could let go of my shyness and feel free.

We shimmied our way out into the crush of people. I recognized plenty of them, but there were a lot of strange women who ogled Roman at every turn. They were gorgeous and much more confident than I could ever be. Probably professional models, or wealthy socialites. Maybe even other daughters of powerful men who might be able to offer Roman more than my father could.

Before I could slink off the dance floor, Roman pulled me close. "Show me your moves, Karine," he said near my ear so I could hear him over the pumping bass.

He stayed glued to me, his eyes never wavering from my face or body as we danced. Maybe he was telling the truth that he'd been attracted to me from the first time he saw me. Maybe he'd be with me even without the clout that came from marrying into such a powerful family.

A busty redhead tried to pull him away and he gave her a slow once over, grinning at her as she yanked his arm with her long-taloned fingers. I'd never wanted to punch someone more in my life. How had marriage turned me into such a violent beast? What was worse, I didn't know who I should be aiming at. The woman, who was just shooting her shot with a hot guy, or Roman, my husband, who was still ogling her.

I glanced to the side, where our bodyguards were hovering just off the dance floor. Demian had been one of the guys my father sent over, which had irritated me at the time but I'd quickly forgotten when Roman and I started grinding to the music. Now he was honed in on me, on my embarrassment at having Roman so obviously enjoying this other woman's attention.

And then Roman shook his head at her and turned back to me. Should I say something? Make a scene and stomp off? Pout? I was so woefully ignorant about relationships. I'd gone on a handful of dates in high school where my bodyguard had always been all too obviously a chaperone. I'd barely gotten a

chaste kiss at senior prom. I was in a holding pattern, wanting a social life but knowing I could never dare to have a relationship that my father didn't sanction and approve.

I stopped thinking when Roman pulled me back into his arms. As if by magic, a slow, sultry R&B song came on and half the people left the dance floor to get drinks, while the true couples wrapped themselves around each other.

I was part of one of those couples and liked it very much. Everything was forgiven and forgotten as Roman's hands moved sinuously down my back to cup my behind and grind my body against his. I gasped to feel the evidence of how much he wanted me and heard him chuckle. His breath on my ear gave me goosebumps despite the heat radiating off of him.

I tipped my head back and he lowered his to hear what I wanted to say. I threw off my mantle of shyness, determined to get what I wanted. A happy marriage. And a heated kiss from Roman.

“Maybe tonight will be—”

Before I could finish, a big hand clapped onto his shoulder and dragged him back, away from me. The enormous blond guy whirled him around, snarling. The remaining couples shrank back as the man held up his fist to Roman, getting right up in his face and growling something I couldn't hear. I didn't need to hear it to know it was something menacing. My first instinct was to throw myself at the blond giant, that sudden urge to fight for what was mine taking over again.

But Demian dragged me away before I could do anything. “That's Ivan Morozov,” he hissed, holding on tight as he pulled me further away.

“Help him,” I shouted, terrified my non-Bratva husband was about to get smashed into the dance floor.

“You're our first priority,” Demian said.

I elbowed him in the ribs, unable to tear my eyes from the violent scene that was about to unfold. To my surprise, Roman reared back his arm and decked Ivan, knocking him to the scuffed dance floor. Roman was on him in an instant now that he had the upper hand, but there were sure to be Morozov's men who were going to intervene at any second.

Demian hauled me toward the exit, motioning for the other bodyguard on duty to go help Roman. I struggled against him to keep my eyes on Roman, but I couldn't see past the crowd that converged around the fight, hungry for bloodshed. Was I really about to become a widow?

Chapter 7 - Roman

Once we'd been dancing for about half an hour, I had relaxed enough to think nothing was going to happen. After all, this was my cousin's place of business and we were surrounded by other people, most of whom were probably tourists and had nothing to do with organized crime.

Karine had really lightened up and her moves were driving me wild, especially in her painted on white dress that showed off her slight tan and accentuated every one of her perfect curves. The more we danced and laughed, the more fun I had, and I almost forgot my need to prove myself and bring down the Drygas. We were just two lovebirds on our honeymoon.

A hot redhead pulled me away, shaking her ass as she grabbed my arm, a big smile on her face. For a split second, I forgot I was married and danced in her direction. A lifetime habit was hard to break, after all. As soon as I noticed Karine glaring at me, I snapped back to reality. No more flirting, at least until my objective was achieved. And it wasn't like my wife wasn't one of, if not the most gorgeous woman in the place, anyway.

The music switched to a slower song as I dismissed the redhead, and I pulled Karine close, enjoying the feel of her against me. She seemed to get over her anger, sliding her hands up my chest to wrap around my neck as we swayed to the music. Her body felt just right as I moved to grip her ass and pull her even closer to me. A sheet of paper wouldn't have fit between us and she had to feel my hard-on pulsing against her belly.

She tipped back her head, a lazy smile curling her full lips. Her eyes fluttered shut as those tempting lips parted. She started to say something and I leaned down to hear her. The music was so loud that our faces were practically touching and I still barely made out what she sighed against my cheek. Was

it an invitation? I didn't want to miss it if it was. I definitely wanted whatever she was offering.

I was either going to ask her to repeat it or kiss her when someone jerked me by the shoulder and swung me away from her. I barely heard her shriek before a massive guy got right up in my face, his fist raised and his arm coiled and ready to strike. I was a big guy who hit the gym regularly, but this dude was a mountain. A mountain with an ax to grind with me. I tensed for the hit, clenching my own fist, ready to react.

"I'm your cousin Ivan," he growled through a sneer that would have been terrifying to anyone witnessing it. "Hit me."

Shocked, sure I must have heard wrong with the music still blaring and the spotlights bouncing all across the dance floor, I just stared at him and his wavering fist, only inches from my face.

"Make it a good one," he urged.

Evelina must have called him and filled him in on the plot, and now he was trying to help me put on a show. I gave him an apologetic look as I snapped to and reared back, leveling him with a hard crack to the chin. He went down like a bag of rocks as a couple of men swarmed us—clearly bodyguards, but who knew for which side. I looked down to see Ivan grinning as blood trickled from his lip and he laughed as he swept my legs out from under me with his foot.

Jesus, these crazy Bratva loved violence.

I landed on him with bone crushing weight and he made a good show of clipping me in the side of the head. My ear rang but it barely hurt and I heard my cousin encouraging me to get in another shot. What a way to be introduced to a family member I never knew I had.

I slammed my fist into his gut, aiming for the side where it wouldn't do much damage and by then one of his men yanked me up by my elbows. Ivan jumped up and grabbed one of the men Feliks had arranged to meet Karine

and me at the club by the back of his neck while twisting his arm behind his back. Since the guard who had me knew the drill, his grip was firm but not painful and I only put up a mild fight for show. The Dryga guard was thrashing with fury, but no match for Ivan the mountain and we were both hauled to the exit and tossed into the parking lot.

Karine stood near our car with that annoying bodyguard who clearly had a crush on her, holding her back from running to me as I landed and skidded on the asphalt.

“Don’t fucking come back here,” Ivan shouted. “I don’t know who you are, but you’re associating with Dryga shit and not welcome at my establishment.”

He stepped back slowly, clearly waiting for me to add to the performance. I jumped up and lunged for him, his bodyguard smacking his hand into my chest to keep me from getting too close while Ivan kept backing toward the club.

“You better watch your back, Morozov,” I shouted, exhilarated by the fight, even though it was all fake. My knuckles were scraped but my blood was singing. Maybe I was really born for this, after all. “You’re not going to be the top dog in Miami much longer, and you better shut your fucking mouth. Don’t you say another word about my wife’s family.”

Looking back at Karine, I could see she looked utterly terrified, but it was filled with pride.

Ivan only laughed as he and his men crowded back inside. I turned and glared at Demian until he let go of Karine’s arm and she rushed at me, looking for signs of damage on my face.

“That one’s from you, baby,” I muttered with a grin when she frowned at the bruise on my jaw. “Those assholes couldn’t get a hit in.”

I waved for the guards to get in their own cars, telling them we were heading home and didn’t need their services anymore. Once inside our car, Karine threw her arms around

me, shuddering with relief. She quickly pulled back, seeming embarrassed.

“You didn’t think I could handle myself, did you?” I joked, still buzzing with adrenaline.

“I have to admit I’m impressed,” she said, a huge smile lighting up her face.

God, she was pretty, especially when she acted like she gave a damn about what happened to me. Maybe she wasn’t so icy, but just shy? The kind of person who needed time to warm up. I smiled back at her and wrapped my hand around the back of her neck, sliding my fingers into her hair as she leaned across the center console. She laughed with relief and I joined in. Was this still the rush of the fight or was I enjoying her company?

“Tell me you were worried about me,” I cajoled.

She playfully shook her head as I leaned closer. She didn’t pull away when I touched my mouth to hers. The shock of her lips against mine rattled me, but the surge of blood to my cock kept me from thinking too hard about it. So what if she was being sweet and caring, so what if I enjoyed impressing her, despite it all being a ruse?

I liked kissing her, liked it a hell of a lot, and she seemed to be enjoying it as well. She sighed as her lips parted and her hand moved to my chest when I swept my tongue between them. Her breath came faster as I tightened my grip in her hair and tugged her head back. I ached to touch her but didn’t want to spook her.

Her innocence inflamed me, my little virgin bride. Holding back the animal instinct to devour her completely was part of the thrill. I wanted her to beg me to take her when the time finally came. Completely and utterly capturing her body and her heart was the ultimate goal.

“You taste amazing,” I said, running my tongue down the side of her throat.

Her only answer was a soft mewling sound as she climbed onto my lap. Without thinking, I reached down to adjust the seat back so she wasn't wedged against the steering wheel, then ran my hand up her thigh and under her tight skirt.

"Roman," she said, driving her fingers through my short hair. "Kiss me some more. I like it so much."

I throbbed against her, and she pressed down hard, smiling against my mouth as I granted her request. "It's all for you, Karine," I told her, making her pull back.

"I guess," she said, eyes wide. "I guess since we're married..."

She was too tentative, wanting to ask me something I wasn't prepared to answer, so I kissed her some more, making her forget whatever worries she had. I kept moving my fingers up her thigh, nudging her dress up her hips until I reached the tiny thong that stretched across her smooth skin.

Easing my fingers underneath, it was my turn to suck in a breath when I felt her wet heat between her thighs. She shivered and gripped my hair tighter, opening her mouth more fully to me.

"I want you to—" she started. "I was trying to tell you in the club that I think we should—"

I pulled back, barely able to focus. The way she wriggled her body against my eager shaft, the way her lips were swollen and wet from my kisses, the way her voice trembled as she tried to tell me what she needed was all too much.

"Get in your seat," I commanded roughly, my frustration coming out sounding too much like anger. "There's no way in hell your first time is in this damn car."

She nodded, scurrying back to her side and whipping her seat belt across her. "Then let's get home, Roman," she urged.

I laughed, setting a record getting us to the house, keeping one hand on her leg in between switching gears. The entire way back, there wasn't a single thought of revenge on my mind.

As we arrived home, we both groaned as we pulled up to the mansion and saw Feliks waiting on the porch. No more honeymoon thoughts. My true plan crashed back in on me like a wrecking ball. This was only one of the reasons I didn't want to accept the house from Karine's father. Feeling entitled to unexpected visits. But as soon as we got out, he made it clear he wasn't there just to catch up.

"That was a stupid idea, Karine," he yelled, laying into her before she had her door shut. "I told you I didn't like it. It was foolish and idiotic."

"Whoa," I said, moving between them, not liking the way he was berating her at all. I liked it less that she was taking it all without flinching, as if she was used to that kind of treatment. "Going to that club was my idea."

Feliks looked past me, still glaring at his daughter. "You don't know anything. She should have known better. She's just lucky things didn't go worse."

I bristled at the insult to both of us but forced myself to keep a conciliatory tone. "Everything's fine. And now Ivan Morozov knows there's a new player in town. One he should be worried about."

"You should have seen him take Ivan down, Papa," Karine piped up.

I stood a little taller at the pride in her voice. "I may be new to the Bratva, but I can handle myself in a fight."

I didn't know if I was still amped up from the fake fight or pissed at my honeymoon getting derailed again, but I stared down Feliks until he nodded.

"Okay, fine," he said. "It's not the way I would have orchestrated a meeting, but now they know you're a bull who's always ready to charge." He clapped me on the shoulder.

“Good job. I heard from the bodyguard that you didn’t back down.”

The bodyguards, who must have snitched to him only minutes after the fight started pulled up in their car and got out. Demian stood by his door with his arms crossed, a stony stare on his face, but the other one who’d been dragged out of the club with me, came over and gave me a congratulatory clap on the shoulder as well.

“He was like a pitbull, Boss,” he said.

“I couldn’t have done it without you,” I told him magnanimously. It was always better to make friends than enemies, at least temporarily.

“Sounds like you’re fitting in great,” Feliks said. “Now how about a drink and you can tell me all about it.”

I glanced over at Karine, who still stood by the car. We exchanged disgruntled looks, and she shrugged. It was clear there was nothing she could say to get rid of her father and I figured it would be best to ride the wave of his elation over my winning a point against his enemy. It was all just climbing the ladder and it felt unwise to push my luck and topple down a rung. Hopefully, I could get things back on track with Karine when Feliks left.

“Sounds good,” I said, unlocking the front door and motioning for him to go ahead.

I followed him in, keeping a smile plastered on my face and forcing all thoughts of what I’d rather be doing out of my head.

Chapter 8 - Karine

Not just disappointment, but irritation welled up in me when I saw my father waiting for us. Did he still think I was a child and not a married woman? Yes, apparently. As soon as we rolled up, he started letting me have it. It was useless to argue, so I was shocked when Roman stepped forward to do just that. Of course, he didn't know that my father was always right, and I admired his courage for defending me.

It was a very husbandly thing to do, and I had to put my head down to hide a smile. For some reason I assumed he would have agreed with my father wholeheartedly and continued his pattern of stroking his ego and sucking up to him like he did before the wedding. Now, it seemed I might be his first priority.

And I didn't mind it. Paired with him not backing down at the club and, I was ready to believe he might have what it took to be one of us after all. And the feeling of satisfaction was surprising. Wasn't I still just being a good little soldier here? I wanted everything to go smoothly between Roman and I so we could have a nice life together, but was I really catching feelings for him?

I was still shivering from the way he made me feel during our heated makeout session. My first one ever, and in a car, no less. I was a mix of giddiness and unbridled lust that could barely be contained once his hands reached my panties, and I couldn't wait for us to get home.

All of it popped like a balloon, because now that Papa was done yelling at me for making poor choices and congratulating Roman on his heroic fight with Ivan Morozov, arguably the biggest, baddest member of the warring mafia factions around, Papa decided it was a good time for a drink.

It was too much to hope that Roman would tell him off now, and I didn't blame him for letting Papa in. I sat down on the decorative cement bench that was surrounded by hibiscus

flowers just at the bottom of the porch steps and crossed my arms over my chest.

I suppressed a sigh when Demian sat down beside me, much too close for comfort. I didn't want to hurt his feelings and scoot over, so I only turned to him with a look that might make him go away. I had already decided to talk to Papa so he wouldn't assign Demian to me anymore. It was just too awkward now, especially after he suggested blowing up my wedding.

"We were told to stay until your father leaves," he said with a shrug.

He'd been my friend for as long as I could remember so could easily read my expressions. He didn't seem offended that I wished he and the other guard would leave. Instead, he decided it was a good idea to try to school me like Papa had done.

"That was foolish to go there, Karine," he said, shaking his head in disappointment.

He knew nothing about disappointment, not when I only wanted them all to leave so I could get back into Roman's embrace. I bit back a tart reply, reminding myself that he'd gotten me out of there before I'd been hurt.

"Roman handled things perfectly," I said.

"That's not the point," he whined.

"Then enlighten me," I told him.

"We're trying to be subtle in our takeover," he said. "We don't have the manpower yet to engage in an outright war. You need to teach your *husband* to stay on his leash."

I hated that he clearly didn't accept Roman as part of my family. Someone who deserved respect. I turned to glare at Demian, and caught the flash of pain in his eyes. With a sigh, I bit back the sharp retort I was about to give him.

It wasn't his fault that Papa hadn't deemed him a suitable match or that I didn't love him the way he wanted.

But I still wouldn't denounce Roman, so decided to change the subject altogether. I brought up the time in middle school when Elise had thought the plastic explosives he had were modeling clay. He'd freaked out to see her about to dig her fingers into the block to start her art project, scaring her to the point she'd tossed it across the room, and we'd all braced to be smashed to smithereens.

He'd given us a twenty-minute lecture until I searched the internet and found out it could withstand a gunshot without exploding and he was just trying to scare us. He admitted it and bought us ice cream. It was a simpler time, before he got his unholy crush on me and had to ruin a perfectly good friendship. I didn't want to lose those good memories. If I continued to be kind to him, maybe he'd see reason and come around.

The pain and anger in his eyes drained away as we reminisced, him reminding me of some pretty embarrassing times that I didn't mind laughing about now. He ended up putting his arm around me but it didn't feel proprietary or weird, just two old friends who'd been through a hell of a lot together. I leaned against his shoulder, still laughing, when the front door opened.

Turning to see Roman giving me a death glare, I straightened up, sliding to the far end of the bench as if Demian were a rattlesnake, instantly feeling stupid for the poor response. I shouldn't have had anything to feel guilty about, but Roman kept glaring at me as my father headed to the other guard who'd been hanging out by their car. He stopped on his way to drop a kiss on my forehead, while telling Demian he was dismissed for the evening.

My heart sank when idiot Demian gave Roman the smugest smile I'd ever seen, as if he'd won something. Papa seemed to finally notice that something wasn't quite right and gave me a dirty look as he clicked his keyfob to unlock his car.

"Don't embarrass your husband, Karine," he said in a low voice, but not low enough that Demian didn't overhear the

warning.

It only made him more cocky, as if there was anything going on to embarrass Roman. My cheeks blazed. I was over all of it and flounced inside, trying to pretend I hadn't just been humiliated for no reason. It was one thing when I deserved a dressing down. It had been a poor choice to go to Morozov's club. But if anyone thought there was honestly something untoward in the hug I gave Demian, then I was going to fight them.

Tears stung my eyes when Roman followed me inside, slamming the front door a little harder than necessary. I quickly blinked them back, hoping we could salvage the evening and get back to how we'd felt about each other in the car.

The look on his face told me that might be impossible, and when he grabbed my arm, my last hope was dashed to bits.

"What was that about?" he asked, face hard, eyes cold as the Arctic sea. "Is that kid going to be a problem?"

I bristled. Demian and I were the same age. Did Roman consider me a kid as well? Any urge I had to get back in his embrace was doused. "What's that supposed to mean?" I asked, sticking my chin out and gritting my teeth to keep from telling him he was a bigger idiot than Demian. I wanted him to spell out his distrust so I could really unleash my fury on him.

"It means, I won't be embarrassed by a betrayal, Karine." His grip on my arm, which had been light, now increased. "You're mine."

I jerked out of his grasp, supremely offended. His words struck me to my very core. "There's nothing more important to me than loyalty," I said, fighting tears. "To imply I'm not loyal has to be the worst insult you could give me. Something you'd be aware of if you knew me at all."

"You're right, I don't know you very well," he said, reaching for me, but not menacingly now. "Why don't we get

to know each other better, then.”

At the same time, his handsome face softened, I was reminded of the way he'd looked that redhead up and down at the club. He'd turned away from me as if he was going to dance with her. As if he forgot all about me. The audacity was too much. There was no way I would just forgive his grave insult when he was such a blatant hypocrite. No amount of his kisses or caresses could have calmed my boiling rage.

“Not likely,” I spat over my shoulder as I stormed up the stairs.

I half expected to feel his hand clamp around my wrist the entire way up, but when I got to the top and glanced back, he was still standing at the foot of the stairs with his arms crossed moodily over his broad chest. I slammed myself into the guest room and once again locked the door.

Once again he didn't come after me. And once again I was infuriatingly disappointed to have to spend another married night alone.

Chapter 9 - Roman

I was way too pumped up by Feliks's admiration to bother going after Karine. It was clear she was furious by what I said and I was in no mood to grovel. This wasn't a sprint, it was a marathon, and I had plenty of time to make her fall in love with me. As much as I might have wanted this night to end differently, I could be patient.

Especially after the way she crawled all over me in the car, and the disappointment in her eyes when she saw that Feliks was here to keep us from racing upstairs. Once she got over her anger, she'd start thinking about the way my hands felt on her, remembering how eager she was. She'd be up there stewing all alone. Good. When the time came, it would be that much sweeter. I couldn't wait to make her beg.

To get my own mind off the way she'd felt and to keep my own memories of her soft, fervent kisses from making me stew, I headed up to the master bedroom where I kept my secret phone tucked away in the back of the bedside table drawer.

I couldn't believe how that one little setup punch to my cousin's face had gotten me so much further already. I imagined it would have been months more schmoozing Feliks before he opened up as much as he did over sips of vodka tonight.

Digging out my phone, I turned it on and sent the info I'd gleaned to Oleg.

There's supposed to be a shipment of weapons in a month, along with more men from Russia. Don't know the exact dates or city yet.

I was so excited I didn't even work out the time difference, but regardless, Oleg's answer came right away.

I'll look into it. Now lay low for a while so it doesn't seem like you're pumping Feliks for info. Great work.

I read the message three times. Short and to the point, but I was glowing with as much pride as when I was awarded a scholarship to college. If I wasn't still burning with lust for Karine, I would have fallen asleep easily. Instead I tossed and turned, hoping she was suffering a similar night of unrest.

Karine was in the kitchen the next morning before me, looking as fresh as a dewy rose. Before she noticed me in the doorway, I checked her out in her green sundress that showed off her shoulders and rustled around her hips as she reached for a mixing bowl. When it was clear she knew I was in the room, her relaxed face grew stormy and she turned away to pull some things from the refrigerator.

She was back to being as chilly as the deep freeze. My first instinct was to snap at her, but I pushed it down. I had to start thinking of her feelings. I'd called her out on possibly being disloyal, something I didn't really believe. And I refused to think that Demian was a real threat.

I sidled up behind her and reached to take the mixing spoon from her hand. "Tell me what you want to do today. Anything you want. I took time off, after all."

She twisted around to scowl at me, but there was a glimmer in her eyes. Hope that I would be the kind of husband she wanted. I could see how badly she wanted to throw away her anger and forgive, but she had pride, too.

"I'm sorry about what I said last night," I gritted out, and she softened even more. It was actually sweet. "I'm sorry it seemed like I didn't trust you, but I don't like other men looking at what's mine."

At my teasing tone, she rolled her eyes but turned so she was facing me, tipping up her chin. There was a hint of a smile forming on her lips. A mischievous one that I liked.

"I can choose anything I want to do today?"

"Anything you want," I assured her, imagining traipsing around the expensive shops in Bal Harbour.

She closed her eyes, thinking. Then, “Skydiving,” she said. I burst out laughing, but she was deadly serious. “You said anything. And I’ve always wanted to do it.

I didn’t love heights, but certainly couldn’t admit that to her. Easing away, I pulled out my phone and started looking for places. With any luck all of them would be booked for weeks. She continued working at the counter and as I made calls to the different companies in the area, I soon had a plate of pancakes with fresh strawberries sliced on top of them in front of me. She plopped down a pitcher of syrup next to my coffee cup, which she topped up, then sat down next to me to eat her own breakfast, all with an expectant look.

“Thanks,” I said, taking a bite of the fluffy pancakes. “Damn, these are good, Karine.”

She shrugged with a pleased little smile. “Any luck finding a place where we can jump today?”

Hearing the word jump made my stomach knot up, but I figured when it came right down to it, she’d back down. There was no way she wasn’t fucking with me and truly wanted to jump out of a plane.

“As a matter of fact, yes,” I said, waiting for her squeal of terror.

Instead, I got a giddy squeal of excitement. She actually pushed back her chair and jumped up, clapping her hands together. “I’ll go change. I’m pretty sure you can’t skydive in a dress.”

She raced out of the kitchen, squeezing my shoulder as she passed me. It was a little bit heartwarming to see, like she didn’t get to do much of what she really wanted her entire life, despite growing up so ridiculously wealthy. It actually made my heart feel a bit warm, melting away my trepidation about jumping out of a damn plane.

Once we were both dressed in casual shorts and t-shirts, we headed out to the airfield, which was about forty

minutes away and in the middle of nowhere. I pulled into the parking lot outside the office and turned to her.

“What kind of person wants to jump out of a plane?” I asked incredulously. “Is this a Bratva thing? Tell me if you have a death wish, Karine.”

She thought I was joking and laughed, squeezing my hand. “It’s going to be so much fun. I can’t wait. Don’t tell me you’re scared.”

I shook my head at her. “Not even a little bit.”

That made her laugh more, and her excitement was infectious. Not to the point I was looking forward to the dive, but I was able to follow her skipping steps into the office. Thankfully there was a bunch of intense training required for solo dives, so at least we were going to be attached to trained professionals who wouldn’t freeze up when it came time to pull the cord on the parachute. Hopefully, anyway.

Karine was completely at ease during the training session, cracking jokes while I struggled to pay attention. Once we were loaded into our gear and in the plane, she gripped my hand the whole way up to our final altitude, but not out of fear. She was exhilarated. The happiest I’d seen her since we met.

When the instructor slid open the door, she grabbed my face and gave me a kiss. “Thank you,” she breathed. “This is a big item on my bucket list and you’re letting me tick it off.”

The next thing I knew, she was attached to her pro and flying through the air. My heart nearly stopped, horror taking over at imagining her dashed to a mere stain on the earth far below. All I needed was to have to explain to Feliks how I got his daughter killed only three days into our marriage. At least that was what I was telling myself the fear was.

My guy asked me if I was ready, which of course I wasn’t, but a primal urge to go after Karine, who was getting smaller and further away by the second, took over.

“Yep,” I said, closing my eyes and grinding my teeth together to keep from screaming as we hurtled out the door.

Holy shit. What a rush. The fear was intense but only lasted a second, and then it was pure adrenaline. There was nothing like it. I barely had time to notice anything, but I was whooping with joy by the time we landed. We somehow made it to the ground a few seconds before Karine and she and her tandem guy landed with perfect grace a few yards away from us.

I was barely out of my harness by the time she scrambled over and flung herself into my waiting arms.

“Did you love it as much as I did?” I asked, kissing her all over her radiant face.

Happy tears rolled down her wind burned cheeks. “So you did love it?”

I picked her up and twirled her around, still feeling like I was in the air. “Thank you,” I told her. “I didn’t even know that should be on my bucket list.”

We fell in a heap, kissing and laughing, neither of us caring if our tandem jumpers were still around. She finally pulled away, on top of me, and rested her elbows on my chest. Her eyes twinkled.

“It’s your turn to pick what we do next,” she said.

I wrapped my fingers around her lush ass and pulled her close so she could feel exactly what I wanted to do. With a blush, she jumped up, pulling me to my feet and to the car. It was a good thing we had to pay in advance, and at some point, our gear had been taken off the field. We’d been making out like teenagers, but maybe that was an expected aftereffect of skydiving and the pros were used to it.

Karine pulled me into the back of the car, tangling herself up on top of me as soon as the door was closed behind us. Her lips crashed clumsily against mine as she tugged my t-shirt up to mash her hands against my chest. I loved every second of her innocent exploring, and my cock was raring to

go, pushing hard against my shorts. I was finally about to get my honeymoon, not really caring where it was at anymore.

I pushed her top up, sliding my thumbs under the edges of her bra to feel the soft skin underneath. Her nipples puckered at my touch, and she writhed against me. After a few moments of heavy breathing, she pulled away, her face tortured.

“I want this so much, but...” She swallowed hard. “You know I’ve never...”

I nodded, lowering my hands to grip her hips and move her away. “You’re not having your first time in a car,” I reminded both of us.

Chapter 10 - Karine

I wished I had never reminded him and wanted to snatch back my words. This was exactly why we stopped last night, and look what happened then? Anything could go wrong in the time it took to get home.

I shook my head desperately. “I don’t want you to stop. I just wanted you to—so you wouldn’t be disappointed.” I stopped, my cheeks flaming.

Roman’s look was dumbfounded. “How the hell could I be disappointed. Get in the front.”

As I climbed over, he jumped out and got in the driver’s seat, turning on the engine as soon as my seatbelt clicked.

“It’s too far to go back home,” I whined, not caring how I sounded. I burned for him, ached with desire. I wanted this more than anything on my bucket list.

“We’re not going home,” he said, scanning the road leading into the small town on the outskirts of the private airfield. “There we go.”

He pulled into a touristy turquoise and gray motel with a curving neon sign that was on even in the daytime. It had a flock of plastic flamingos outside the office and Roman nearly mowed them down as he ran in to get us a room. He unlocked the door and nudged me inside, giving me a kiss that had me collapsing against him. I tried to pull him inside, confused why we were standing in the doorway when the bed was only a few feet away, screaming for us to get on it.

“I’ll be right back,” he said, turning and jogging through the parking lot to the convenience store across the street.

Frowning, I slammed myself inside and wriggled out of my clothes. Since I’d only expected to go skydiving, I

frowned some more at my reflection in the mirror. My everyday undies weren't exactly sexy, but I could at least brush out my hair that was tangled from the exhilarating trip through the air. The trip that Roman had made happen.

Things were really looking up, and I didn't expect I'd be spending any more lonely, angry nights in the guest room. It only took a few minutes for Roman to return, and he tossed a box of condoms on the bed before sweeping me into his arms with a hungry look. I pulled away, glancing at the box, not sure why I felt so disappointed. Didn't he want to have children with me? I guess I had assumed we'd get started on that right away, but it seemed like he wanted to wait.

"God, you're so gorgeous," he said, not noticing where my gaze was directed. His was roaming up and down my body as he gripped my waist. "Your body is so freaking beautiful."

His mouth claimed mine, with his tongue pushing between my lips, I completely forgot everything except the sensation of his hands running up and down my sides. Was it only half an hour or so ago that I thought flying through the air while plummeting toward the earth was the single best feeling in the world?

Not anymore. His fingers were like magic and he soon had my sports bra up over my breasts, teasing my nipples to tight peaks.

"I wish I had something sexier on," I said when he pulled away long enough to help me get it over my head.

"No way," he said. "You couldn't be sexier than you are right now."

I smiled, melting against him, not caring if he meant the words or not. When he jerked me close and I felt the stiff rod press against my belly, it seemed like he meant them and I smiled wider against his mouth.

"Enjoying yourself?" he asked.

"Very much," I told him shyly.

He laughed an almost sinister laugh as he grabbed me behind my knees and lifted me. “Then wait until you see what’s next, little girl.”

I didn’t bristle at him calling me that. In fact, it raised even more goosebumps than when he dropped me onto the bed and began kissing my breasts. His mouth traveled down my stomach and my hands found their way to his hair. I ran my fingers back and forth across the almost military-short strands, savoring everything. It was almost too much.

I breathed in deeply, my lungs filling with the slightly damp motel room air, the whir of the air conditioning working overtime to cool the place. A block of ice couldn’t have cooled me down, especially when he got to my panties and nipped at the waistband.

One hand slid up my thigh, spreading my legs apart as he eased the white cotton fabric down. He made a low growling noise and looked up at me.

“You taste like honey,” he said. “I need to lick your pussy, little girl. Don’t be scared.”

I thrashed my head back and forth on the pillow. “I’m not. I need it.”

His chuckle vibrated between my thighs and with another feral noise, he gripped the sides of my panties and tore them in two, tossing the pieces aside. Before I could gasp, he plunged his face against my wet heat and lapped me like I was a dripping ice cream cone in July. Fast and desperate as if he didn’t want to lose a drop.

I clenched my fists into the covers and raised my hips. “Oh my God, Roman,” I moaned. I was lost. He had told me I was his several times, but now I knew it was true. He owned me. I truly belonged to him as long as he never stopped doing that.

His furious movements slowed and when he circled my swollen nub with the flat of his tongue I cried out, then

clapped my hand over my mouth. He reached up to pull my hand away.

“No, make all the noise you want. I want to hear how good this makes you feel.”

“It feels really good,” I said, my legs shaking as I struggled to raise my hips again.

He grabbed them and held them tight against the bed, moving his tongue in ways that made me dizzy despite lying down. I was quaking when he stopped abruptly and looked up at me with wild eyes.

“Tell me I’m the only man to ever eat this sweet pussy of yours,” he said, digging his fingers into my hips.

“Yes,” I said. “Don’t stop. Please don’t stop now.”

His eyes searched my face, and a slow smile curled his lips. “I think I’m ready to make you come now, little girl.”

“Yes, please,” I said.

His fingers tightened. “Has any man ever made you scream before?”

My head twisted from side to side as I strained my body toward him. “No, never. I need you, Roman. Whatever you want to do to me, I need it.”

He finally lowered his head again, this time pushing his tongue deep inside me, over and over. I forgot to breathe, then gasped in big gulps of air. When he found my most sensitive spot once more, it was like flying all over again. I was free. The scream that came out of me seemed to come from someone else, because I was no longer even on this earth.

He kept pushing his tongue in slow circles, but now let me writhe around. When I collapsed in a limp heap with my arms flat out at my sides, I came back to my senses to the sound of his low laughter.

“Just wait until I fuck you, Karine,” he said.

I shivered and reached for his shoulders to pull him back up to me. “I don’t want to wait.”

“Good,” he said, looking down for the condom box, which had fallen to the floor when he tossed me on the bed.

I watched him open one and slowly roll it down over his thick shaft. “Wait,” I said, pushing his hand aside. “I want to touch you.”

His eyes closed and his breath hitched when I wrapped my hand around his cock. He pulsed against my palm and I slowly moved it up and down. Shocked that I wasn’t feeling shy at all anymore, I peeled away the condom and lowered my mouth to the dripping tip. My heart hammered in my chest, both with anticipation and worry that I’d do something wrong. But I had to taste him just as he’d tasted me.

Rolling my lips up, I gently swiped my tongue around the tip, smiling when I heard his gasp. “Am I doing it right?” I asked, glancing up at him.

He tangled his fingers in my hair. “Oh, baby, there’s no wrong way. But you’re doing just fine.” The last words came out strangled when I took a chance and sucked hard.

By the time I got into it, he pulled me away with a tortured look on his face. “I can’t take any more,” he said. “Not if you don’t want me to come down your pretty throat.”

“Maybe I do,” I said, feeling wicked and sexy and loving every second of it.

His eyes rolled heavenward and he flipped me onto my back, spreading my legs wide as he centered himself between them. “Maybe next time,” he groaned, reaching for a new condom.

I wanted to tell him to leave it, just hurry up and get inside me, but I feared his response. If he didn’t want children yet, that was his right. There was plenty of time, and I was too lost in impatience to worry about it or be disappointed again.

Soon enough, he pressed against me, first easing his fingers inside to stretch me. I closed my eyes and tried not to wince.

“I’ll make you feel good again, little girl,” he said softly, pushing deeper. “God, your pussy is so damn tight.”

“And you’re very, very big,” I said nervously, cracking open an eye to peek at him.

“Don’t worry about a thing,” he said, stroking my tender nub again and making me see stars.

“But what about you?” I asked. How did I know if he’d enjoy it?

His low, rumbling laugh made me blush. “Believe me when I say I’m going to love every second of fucking this hot little body of yours, Karine.”

I began to tremble and tug at his hand. “Please,” I begged. “Please hurry, then. I have to know what it feels like to—” I stopped, my cheeks burning.

“To have me slam my cock deep inside you?” he asked. “To have your tight little hole stretched and filled until you scream some more?”

“Yes,” I said weakly, so close to tipping over the edge again. “Yes, that.”

His fingers eased out of me and he began to tease me. “Tell me, then. Don’t be shy. You’re my wife. You can say and do whatever you like. And whatever I command.”

Oh my gosh, did I love hearing him call me his wife, this time with such passion in his voice. I saw his legs shuddering, the muscles in his arms straining. He wanted this every bit as much as I did. I’d never experienced such power, never expected to feel such a thing while lying on my back, so completely splayed open to him.

“I need your cock inside me,” I said, my voice ringing out in the small room. “I need you to fuck me, Roman.”

He sucked in a breath and swore. “Hang on tight, little girl.”

I gripped his shoulders as he pushed inside me, in one long, smooth motion. I gritted my teeth against the slight pain and he held his body still until I nodded for him to continue.

“I’m okay,” I said, kissing the side of his neck.

Each smooth, sinuous stroke drove me further over the edge. He kissed me, dragging his lips to my jaw to rain tiny kisses down my throat. His slight stubble rasped against my skin; the sound mingled with our gasps and pounding heartbeats. He smoothed the sweaty strands of hair from my cheek and dropped his head to my shoulder.

“There are so many things I want to do to you,” he groaned. “But I need to come inside you now.”

I wrapped my arms around him and pulled him close. “Well, we still have a whole box of those things,” I said, nodding toward the floor.

He laughed, his thrusts gaining intensity and speed. I screamed again when he slid his hand between us and found my slick, swollen nub. The sound echoed with his own roar as he pounded into me, finally slowing and falling on top of me. His breathing was as ragged as mine and our hearts hammered in our chests.

“I can’t move,” he murmured into my hair.

“I don’t want you to,” I said, wracked by aftershocks and the feeling of him still inside me.

I locked my arms around his neck and breathed in his scent, hanging on to the moment for as long as I could.

Chapter 11 - Roman

I finally rolled to the side after laying, obliterated, on top of Karine for several long minutes. I was shocked by the intensity of our first time together, her first time ever, and shaken to the core by it. How was it possible that someone so inexperienced had been so perfect?

As I came back to my senses, I tucked my arm under her head and pulled her close to my chest, not wanting to lose the moment. For the first time, I got a good look at the room we'd ended up in, in some seedy roadside tourist trap. The curtains were a dark green palm frond pattern and the wall sconces were beige ceramic seashells. A large wooden pelican sat on the pale, fiberboard desk, and a scuffed flat screen tv shared the wall opposite the bed with a painting of a lighthouse that looked like it would be more at home in Maine than Miami.

“What a dump this place is,” I said, feeling like I should apologize for bringing her there.

“I kind of like it,” she said. “I mean, how many four-star hotels will give you this kind of ambiance?”

“None, or they wouldn't have four stars,” I said, liking the sound of her giggles and joining in.

When was the last time I had so much fun? Not just the amazing sex, which was phenomenal, but when had I laughed so much? I couldn't remember. I hugged her closer, not wanting reality to intrude yet.

“It's your turn to pick again,” I told her. “What do you want to do next?”

She made a big show of thinking it over, her answer shocking me more than the request to skydive.

“I want to go home and cook my husband his favorite meal,” she said.

Once again I thought she was joking, but she wasn't and I was touched. She dragged herself out of my embrace and started getting dressed, asking what I wanted her to cook. It was good she was loosening up, maybe even falling for me already, which was exactly what I wanted. She kept adorably guessing my favorite meal and I kept telling her she was wrong just to see her screw up her pretty face and keep thinking. There was no way I was going to fall for her just because she was being so sweet. It would only take one wrong word and she'd turn back into the ice princess again.

I got dressed and we headed home, stopping at a grocery store where I finally admitted I wanted plain old pasta and meatballs. She made me swear up and down I wasn't picking something easy, assuring me she could cook anything. But that was what I wanted, so we pushed the cart side by side, putting ingredients in and, mildly quarreling about different brands and pretending to be shocked by the high prices. Just like a real married couple.

I should have felt stupid, but I didn't. I was having a great time. And what was so wrong with enjoying myself as long as I got the job done?

At home, I insisted on helping and she gave me some little chores to do that wouldn't interfere with her culinary magic, as she called it. I chopped the vegetables for a salad and set the table, then when there was nothing left to do, I just sat at the kitchen table and watched her.

Once we got home, she had changed back into her green sundress and padded back and forth from counter to stove on her bare feet. Her shiny blonde hair was piled into a bun on top of her head, a few strands dancing around her cheeks that she kept blowing out of her eyes now and then. It was better than any TV show.

Pretty soon I was eating the most delicious spaghetti and meatballs in my entire life, maybe the best meal, hands down. I gobbled it up, starving after the eventful day. When

she finally huffed, wanting to know what I thought, I sat back and made a big show of loosening my belt.

“You can throw a punch, fly through the air like a paratrooper, and cook like a Michelin chef. What else can you do?”

Her joyful grin was worth the extravagant compliment, and the mischievous look in her eyes made my blood race.

“Why don’t you wait and see,” she said, pushing aside her plate and the serving dish and crawling onto the table.

Reaching for me, she slid her hand behind my head and pulled me close for a kiss that rocked me forward to tangle my fingers in her bun. After another second, she was on my lap, tugging at the buttons on my shirt that I’d changed into.

“Pop them,” I growled, unzipping her dress and shoving it down her shoulders.

Once her pert tits were free, I leaned down to nuzzle each one, enjoying her soft moan as much as I’d enjoyed the dinner. Who was I kidding? Much more than that. Nothing could be more tasty than Karine. She straddled my lap, nearly tipping the kitchen chair backwards, but I hurriedly grabbed the table to keep us upright.

With frenzied hands, she hoisted her skirt up around her hips and ground against my stiff cock, about to burst out of my jeans.

“Get them off,” she cried, dropping her forehead to mine.

Her eyes were screwed shut and her hands moved as if she was in a panic, up and down my chest to dig her fingers into my shoulders.

“My wild little girl,” I said. “Do you mean my jeans or your panties?”

“Both. Hurry.” She yanked at my shirt, popping all the buttons as I’d told her, then leaned down to kiss my neck and chest.

“Okay,” I said, suddenly as frenzied as she was. My sweet little voracious virgin was driving me crazy.

I got my jeans open and shoved her panties to the side, my cock just inches from ramming into her slippery, wet pussy. “Damn it,” I said. “Condoms. I left them in the car like an asshole.”

She shook her head, kissing me deeply and grinding her slick folds against my shaft. “No, I can’t wait. Just this once. Just—” she pulled back, her eyes widening. Her cheeks flamed. “You want to come inside me, don’t you? Won’t my tight pussy feel so good without one of those things?”

For a split second, I feared entrapment. I didn’t want a kid—not in this situation. But she was right, and my mind stopped working at the thought of her riding me, feeling every bit of her wet heat taking my cock. I swore, then groaned when she wrapped her soft fingers around my shaft, stroking me in long, slow movements.

“Jesus, you’re already a pro,” I said, thrusting my fingers inside her. So tight, so wet. I wanted it, yes I did.

“I aim to please,” she said, rolling her thumb over my tip and making me pulse in her hand.

With an inward curse and outward growl, I lifted her hips and slammed her down on me, every inch of my cock sinking deep inside her. She gasped and grabbed my shoulders, letting her head fall back.

“Oh, that’s just what I wanted,” she said.

Gripping her hips, I helped her move, balanced precariously as we were on the kitchen chair, the remnants of her home-cooked meal behind her. I pulled her hair all the way out of the bun, breathing in her shampoo scent mixed with the slightly musty air of the motel and the sunshine and grass at the airfield. A perfect day, and a perfect way to end it.

“This one’s going to be quick, baby,” I told her. “It’s just what you do to me.”

“Touch me,” she pleaded, taking my hand and guiding it to her core.

I eased my fingertips against her clit, gritting my teeth as she clenched around my cock. I circled and kneaded until she was gasping, then biting my shoulder. A sob escaped her as she bounced harder and faster against me. Holy shit did I love driving deep inside her.

The moment she cried out, her pussy was like a vice. I let my head drop back, still guiding her movements until I couldn't hold on another second.

“I'm going to come inside you, just like you wanted,” I said. “Hold on tight.”

With barely focused eyes, she smiled weakly at me, her pussy still pulsing as I shot my seed deep inside her, roaring loud enough to shake the chandelier above our heads.

We ended up plastered together, tipping off the chair and onto the granite tiles. I wrapped my arm around her to protect her head and she landed with a thump on top of me, all giggles and smiles.

“You're so beautiful.” The words just came out of me. She wrinkled her nose and I tugged on her hair. “You know you are. Don't act like I'm the first one who's told you.”

“I like it the best when you tell me, though,” she said, her sweetness almost overwhelming me. Not an ice queen at all right now. I'd thoroughly thawed her.

I stood up, carrying her with me. A dingy motel was one thing. I wasn't going to let her hang out on the floor. “If this is what our honeymoon's going to be like, I could take off more time,” I said, carrying her up the stairs.

She half-heartedly wiggled to get down but I held on tight, liking the feel of her cradled in my arms.

“Take off all the time you want,” she said, sighing against my shoulder. Then, yawning so big I almost feared she'd take my head off.

“Come along, let me tuck you in bed,” I said.

“Are we really going to sleep together?” she asked, with the mocking tone I found so charming.

“It wasn’t my choice to sleep apart,” I reminded her. Before she could make a face, I kissed her and laid her on the bed, rolling her to the side like a ragdoll when I whipped back the covers. Once she was under them, I kissed her again and got in beside her.

“Good night, husband,” she said, her cheeks turning pink even as her eyes closed and she sank her head against my chest.

I stroked her arm, smiling when I heard her soft, even breathing. I was about to fall asleep along with her when I heard a quiet buzz from the bedside table drawer. My secret phone, which I needed to remember to put on silent now that my wife and I were sharing a room.

It could only be Oleg with an update on the situation with Dryga moving men from Russia to Miami, which was important. Definitely the most important thing. I turned and pulled Karine closer, letting my eyes drift shut and falling asleep with her breath tickling my neck.

Chapter 12 - Karine

Our honeymoon week was a romantic whirlwind once we got on the right foot with each other. Every day was a new adventure, no matter what we were doing, as long as we were together. And we stayed glued to each other's sides.

Even though our house was fully furnished by a professional decorator, we both agreed it was a little bit impersonal and stuffy. There were things we both loved about the place and things we both agreed had to go, like the giant art deco painting above the white stone fireplace. We also got rid of a lot of the stainless steel sculptures that dotted the bookshelves and went out shopping at small antique stores for softer and more homey items to put up instead.

With every vase or picture frame or other knick-knack we found, we had to make up a story that went with it. For the early twentieth-century cut crystal inkwell I had to have for the desk in the library, I told Roman that it had belonged to a woman who started writing mystery novels after her husband left her for a much younger woman. He'd abandoned her with nothing and she scribbled her books by hand in her dark little boarding house room since she couldn't afford a typewriter.

"But she could afford this crystal inkwell?" he asked, holding back his laughter.

"It was her grandmother's," I said. "The only thing her bastard husband didn't take when he ran off with his young tart."

"Fine, get it. That's too much history to leave behind."

His stories were just as good, and it was nice to find out he had a fun side. Besides shopping, we frolicked on the beach, took a windsurfing lesson, and crashed an anniversary party barbecue, rushing off with our paper plates full of ribs and sausages and corn on the cob before we got found out. We made brownies from scratch, smearing the batter all over each

other and finding ourselves on the kitchen floor again, winded and sweaty.

I swore up and down I didn't need anything when he pulled me into a swanky jewelry store on one of our days out, but he lavished me with an expensive present anyway.

"Nobody needs jewelry," he said, putting the gold necklace with the diamond and sapphire pendant around my neck. "But admit you love it."

I had to admit I did love it, and the color of the sparkling gemstone made me think of his eyes. When he wasn't looking, I had the jeweler put a watch aside that Roman had admired. Now that he was about to return to work, I'd have time to have it engraved as soon as I could think of something special enough.

I might have actually been falling in love with my husband. At least well on the way. Since we got off on the wrong foot, I was beginning to believe it was never going to be possible, but I just might get my happy ending after all.

"Do you have to go?" I clung onto him in the foyer as he got ready to leave for work. "You said you'd take more time off."

He kissed my forehead, then tugged on my hair until my head tipped back so he could plant a more thorough one on the mouth. "I've got to drum up some business now that I'm staying in Miami permanently." He squeezed my bottom, pulling me close and sliding his tongue between my lips. "You'll just have to wait until this evening. Hopefully, that will tide you over until then."

I went weak in the knees like I always did when he held me so forcefully, but regretfully pulled away to let him go. I liked that he was independent and didn't rely on my father for our livelihood.

He reached around and gave me a playful tap on the backside, a wicked grin on his face. "I'll video chat you later,

so wear something sexy.” He winked as he headed out the door. “Or nothing at all,” he called over his shoulder.

“I can’t wait,” I called back.

Once he was gone, loneliness overtook me, which I tried to brush off. After all, I liked that he had a job outside our organization, and even if he didn’t, he’d have to spend time away from me anyway. I wandered around, trying to find something to do to pass the time. I was used to acting as my father’s secretary, setting up his meetings and making sure things went smoothly, even accompanying him on many of them. Was that over now that I was married?

I thought I’d die of boredom if I had to be a housewife, with a staff of people so there wasn’t even any cleaning to do. Maybe one day when we had children...

My phone rang, interrupting my daydream.

“Karine, come have lunch with me,” my father boomed. “I’ll send a car.”

I agreed, glad to have something to do and thrilled I’d be able to give him a good report about my first week of married life when he inevitably asked me if I was happy. I definitely was. Happier than I’d ever dared to hope. Thinking back on when I used to worry and wonder who I’d end up with, I usually only hoped to be less than miserable.

However, as soon as I sat down and ordered at the beachside restaurant, instead of asking how things were going, Papa started grilling me.

“So, what have you two talked about?” he asked.

“I don’t know, this and that. We started decorating the house a little.”

He scowled. “Does he ever talk about his brother? Have you spoken to him at all? Seen him?”

I had to admit that Roman rarely brought up his twin, and I hadn’t had a phone conversation with him, let alone a

video chat. Then Papa asked me if I knew anything about Roman's childhood and upbringing.

"A little," I said, confused. "He was raised by a single mom, went to school in Calif—"

"Yes, I know all that," Papa interrupted. "Anything deeper?"

A sinking feeling settled in my stomach, not letting me enjoy the ceviche the server set down between us. "What's this about?" I asked. "Do you suddenly not trust Roman?"

I didn't think I could bear it if my newfound happiness was about to be ripped away. Or even dented a little. I knew that Roman had a past I didn't like thinking about. But his womanizing ways were behind him now. I didn't think Papa cared about things like that, though, so if he was getting at something, it was much worse than Roman's bad-boy reputation.

Thankfully, Papa relaxed. "Nothing like that, sweetie. I just want to make sure you're getting along. Newlyweds talk about their childhoods, don't they?"

"Sure," I said, the knot in my stomach slowly untying. "We just haven't gone back that far yet. There's plenty of time."

He agreed, and motioned for me to eat up. I was so relieved that I wasn't going to hear something bad about Roman that I was able to gobble down the meal. We walked along the beach for a while after, peeking into the shops and catching up. When his driver returned me to the house, I felt foolish for being worried.

I was barely home for ten minutes when Roman's video chat came through, and I hurried to answer it while standing on the back patio. He frowned to see me wearing a sundress instead of the sexy lingerie he'd been expecting.

"Sorry, I forgot all about it," I said. "I can't wait until you get home to talk, though."

His face went dark, his frown deepening. “Am I in trouble for something?”

I laughed. “No, silly. I just want to know more about you. Like what it was like to grow up with a twin.”

He shrugged it off, saying he had to get back to a meeting and ending the call. I wondered if he would have had more time for me if I’d been half naked, and tried not to let those thoughts or what Papa had said at lunch put me in a bad mood. Instead, I took a shower and changed into something slinky for when Roman got home.

He was exactly on time, and I threw myself into his arms. “I missed you,” I said, not even feeling embarrassed for admitting it. “What do you want to eat for dinner?”

“It doesn’t matter,” he said, oddly cool. He half-heartedly returned my hug, then asked me what I did all day.

“Nothing much,” I said. “Thought of you, took a swim, thought about you some more.”

He didn’t smile. “You didn’t have lunch with your father, then?” he demanded.

I was stunned at his tone. “I did,” I said.

“So it was a secret lunch?”

What was wrong with him? “No, I just didn’t think it was that big of a deal. Do I need to fill out an itinerary for you when we’re apart? He just called me up and invited me, so I said yes.” Then I realized he shouldn’t have even known about it before I told him. “Are you spying on me?” I asked, unable to hide my feelings about that.

He looked as offended as I felt. “So, was Demian part of your father’s security detail today? Did you two have any little chats?”

Fury had me balling my fists at my side. I never even noticed who was working security for Papa that day. “Are you seriously getting jealous right now? After the honeymoon we just had? A honeymoon I didn’t want to end, by the way.”

His eyes swept me from my hairline to my bare toes and back up again. His laugh was cruel, and his eyes shot daggers at me. "I don't get jealous," he told me. "I just want to make sure you know who you belong to. Since I'm not sleeping with anyone else when I could have a throng of women waiting in line, then you shouldn't get to be with anyone else, either."

I stepped back as if he'd slapped me. The words hurt as much as an actual slap. As he brushed past me to go toward the kitchen, I turned and hurried upstairs before he saw the tears that threatened to roll down my cheeks at any second. I slammed into the guest bedroom that I didn't think I'd have to hide out in ever again and let them fall.

Once they were unleashed, it didn't seem like they'd stop anytime soon. How could I have been so happy and sure of everything only that afternoon, positive I'd never be as miserable as I used to fear in my arranged marriage. This was pure and utter misery, sitting on the floor and sobbing after being distrusted and insulted. I finally forced myself to stop crying because Roman didn't deserve my tears, but I stayed huddled on the floor, unable to leave the room to face him.

What had gotten into him? How did everything go from being so perfect to absolute hell?

Chapter 13 - Roman

It was rough leaving Karine that morning, but I needed to get back to work. I set up my computer at the bar to catch up with everyone on the West Coast, reaching over to turn on the coffee machine. My South Beach apartment was now doubling as my temporary office until I could find a suitable building for the new branch.

As soon as I was settled in with a cup of coffee and had all my emails pulled up on my laptop, I got a call from Evelina. She was on my regular phone under a false name that would be traced back to an accounting firm in Los Angeles. It was a perfectly benign contact as long as we didn't spend too much time in conversation together. She may have tried to call me on the secret one, but it was still hidden away on silent mode, only to be brought out when I was sure I was alone. Which hadn't been often since my honeymoon took a turn for the better, and Karine and I had been nearly inseparable the last week.

"What's up?" I asked, tension rising. It had to be something important, or she wouldn't be calling me at all.

"I've got discreet surveillance on Feliks," she said. "And your house, of course. And no sooner than you were out the door today, a car picked up your wife and drove her to meet him at some restaurant on the north end of the beach. Crowded place, couldn't overhear a word of their conversation."

I'd known about both her tail on Feliks and her covering my new home, but I'd never expected Karine to be up to something fishy. And to be honest, I wasn't that worried about whatever she and Feliks were talking about. But there was something I was definitely interested to know.

"Can you send me pictures?" I asked.

"On their way," my sister answered.

Only a few seconds later, the pictures arrived, surprisingly clear despite being taken with a long lens camera all the way across a busy street. I honed in through the other diners to find Karine and Feliks sitting at a small corner table, deep in conversation, but my eyes didn't settle on them. Sure enough, that little shit with the big crush on Karine was hovering nearby, laser-focused on my wife.

I had no idea why I was hit with such instant and total fury. It was surely nothing more than a simple lunch with her father, and Demian was a trusted bodyguard. There was nothing more to it, was there? Hadn't she shown who she really wanted to be with? There was no way this was jealousy. I gritted out my thanks to Evelina and called Oleg next. Anything to get my mind off the nearly uncontrollable urge to find that twerp and break his neck.

Had they talked? Did he try to touch her? Worse, had she tried to touch him? Next, I began to wonder if it had been her who suggested lunch as a way to get to see him.

"Hello, son," Oleg said in Russian.

The sound of his voice and hearing him call me helped me calm down somewhat. Not totally, but I was able to remember what I was doing all this for and process the update he gave me.

So far, there hadn't been any sign of the Drygas moving people from their stronghold in St. Petersburg to Miami but that didn't mean it wasn't happening or that the shipment of weapons was canceled.

"I haven't heard anything new," I told him. "Laying low like you suggested."

I didn't want to tell him it was because I'd spent the last week either in bed with Karine or out doing fun things with her to win her heart. All so I could break it, of course.

"Good work, Roman. Stay alert to anything out of the ordinary, and try to schedule some time with Feliks to get any

new intel. If they change the date or the location, it's important we know ahead of time."

"Got it."

After that, I called Sergei. I still had to keep my mind from swirling with thoughts of Karine and that mangy kid.

"You come to your senses, finally?" he asked. From the background sounds, I could tell he was in our offices in LA.

"Have you?" I asked in return.

He ignored that, launching into his regularly scheduled diatribe. "You know we could probably have a relationship with Oleg without becoming crime bosses," he said.

It took me half a beat to realize he'd included himself in that, and I considered it a small step in the right direction. "Yeah, sure. You totally could," I encouraged. "Maybe reach out. See what happens. Maybe we can both head to Moscow after this shipment we're waiting on arrives."

"I don't want to hear anything about it," he said angrily. "This isn't going to end with a shipment, or whatever comes after that. Have you ever thought about how you're going to extricate yourself from this bullshit situation you're in? Have you ever stopped to consider you might not win? This isn't losing money on a bad stock, Roman. You're heading into a real fight. Real danger."

"Stop worrying," I said when he ran out of air.

"How can I not worry?" he shouted. "You're the only family I have left. And if you say I have a father and a sister and another brother and a whole slew of cousins, I'll fly into Miami just to kick your ass. Cut your losses with this sham, and come home. If Oleg doesn't like it, then he's not anyone we want in our lives, anyway."

I tried to calm him down for the next several minutes, but he was good and pissed off at me. By the time I ended the call, nothing was resolved, and my mood was worse than ever.

By the time I got home, I fully expected Karine to tell me all about her lunch, but then she went and tried to keep it a secret.

Or it was so uneventful that she “forgot.” All I kept thinking about were those pictures with Demian hovering in the background, waiting to take my place. And I blew my stack. I should have walked away and checked with Evelina to see if she had anything on Karine after she left the restaurant. If she and Demian were alone together at any time. Then I wondered why I cared so much and kept getting pissier until I became such an asshole I wanted to break my own neck.

I stormed past her, trying to ignore the tears in her eyes. The tears I’d put there with my damn temper. And for what? Why? I wasn’t fucking jealous.

Was I?

I slammed into the kitchen to make a sandwich I realized I wasn’t hungry for, then stormed outside to sit by the pool to think. I had to get my focus back on what was important.

I just wasn’t sure what that was at the moment.

Chapter 14 - Karine

I huddled in an armchair in the guest room, not just upset, but hungry. I hadn't eaten anything since lunch because I was waiting for Roman to get home so we could have dinner together. And then he'd gone and treated me like crap for no reason.

I didn't really think he was spying on me, which meant he must have talked to my father, who mentioned our lunch. When I forgot to say anything about it, maybe Roman thought I was lying, which set him off.

It pissed me off that he didn't trust me, but then again, he didn't know me that well, either. It wasn't like we'd had months to get to know each other and fall in love like normal couples. And to think that just that morning, I was close to admitting to myself that I was falling for him.

So, I could understand why he'd been upset, but there was no excuse for the horrible things he said. I burned with shame and indignance remembering them, and the vitriol in his voice. Maybe he was hungry, too, and that was one of his quirks? To act like an ass when his blood sugar was too low? Still, I couldn't stand for that kind of behavior.

I'd met plenty of women who'd had arranged marriages, including my own mother. Since they knew I'd have one of my own one day, they'd all told me how they "trained" their men out of bad habits and behaviors. I was in this damn marriage, so I couldn't keep running off whenever Roman acted like a jerk. I had to confront him or cajole him. Or something.

I sure wished my mother was still alive to give me advice, because she and my father had always seemed happy. One thing was certain: she'd tell me to stop hiding. But first, I had to make sure I wasn't still in a bad mood, and get rid of some of my jangly nervous energy. A dip in the pool and a few

quick laps would work it off, then I'd grab a sandwich. Maybe I'd bring something to Roman, wherever he was hiding out.

It wasn't in our bedroom, and I hurriedly changed into my swimming suit, before heading out to the pool. The door to his home office was shut, so I figured he was in there. Still peeved, I flipped off the door, then felt silly since we had cameras everywhere. Well, if he saw me do it, he should know he deserved it.

I followed the curving path leading to the pool, and as soon as I got past the decorative palms, I saw him sitting on one of the lounge chairs, the umbrella tilted to keep the late evening sun out of his eyes. I ducked back behind the palms, hoping he hadn't seen me. So much for a swim to work off my anger. He was even going to ruin that.

“Karine.”

I froze, as if I'd become invisible if I stayed still. Of course, I had on a siren red bikini, certainly standing out like a beacon through the green fronds.

“Come here,” he commanded in a voice I couldn't disobey.

Keeping a neutral—well, probably somewhat irritated face, I walked with my head held high to the edge of the lounge chair. He looked up at me with his hand shielding his eyes, and I scowled down at him.

With a sigh, he stood up and took my hand. “I'm sorry. I said horrible things that you didn't deserve. I was an insufferable asshole, and I'm really sorry.”

He looked like he had just eaten something sour, but he sounded sincere. When his eyes scanned my nearly naked body, I got a warm, tingly feeling, really wanting to forgive him and get back to the honeymoon phase. I still remained silent.

He put his hands on my waist, a feather-light touch. “What do you want to do?” he asked, a hint of teasing in his voice I couldn't resist.

He was trying, and I got a mischievous streak I couldn't deny, any more than I could deny the way his grip on my waist was making me weak. I planted my hands on his chest and shoved him backward into the pool. He went under like a stone, sending a splash of cool water over my feet. When he surfaced, spluttering, I held up my hands as if I'd had no choice.

"I want to go swimming," I said, daring him to get mad at me.

He swam over to the side with two long, slicing strokes, the muscles in his back straining against his soaked dress shirt. "These were six hundred dollar shoes, Karine."

I could tell he didn't care and jumped out of the way as he made a grab for my ankle. "Then you should get cheaper shoes for around the pool," I said, skipping out of his reach again.

With a shout of frustration, he hoisted himself out and scooped me up before I could get three steps away. Seconds later, we were both underwater, coming up laughing. He ducked under again and tossed his sodden shoes out, then started unbuttoning his shirt.

"Are you going to skinny dip?" I asked, reaching around to unhook my top.

"I'm not swimming in my Gucci suit pants," he said with mock bitterness.

His eyes shined when I slid my bottoms down and tossed them onto the edge along with his clothes. When we were both naked under the clear blue water, he swam up next to me, caging me against the side with his muscular arms.

"I really am sorry," he said, leaning in to kiss me.

"I know," I told him as our mouths touched. I dropped my hands below the surface to wrap around his waist, enjoying the lazy way his tongue played against my lips.

"This is so much better than fighting," he said.

“Mmhmm,” I agreed, moving my hands to his chest. I let him kiss me for another few seconds, then when his guard was down, I shoved against his chest with my palms.

He floated back, his eyes comically wide. Ducking under the water, I swam around him and headed for the waterfall. The crashing sound echoed as I fluttered my feet like a mermaid to stay ahead of him, resurfacing in the grotto behind the tumbling water.

His head popped up a few seconds later, and he smiled as he reached for me. I paddled to the side of a ledge that had been created to look like we were in a natural cave. It was perfectly smooth, though, with tiny lights set into the fake stalactites on the ceiling. Once we were further away from the waterfall, the sound wasn't so loud. With the twinkling fairy lights up above and the last of the sun sparkling through the flowing water, it was very romantic.

Even though the water was only up to my chest and a little above his waist near the edge, he still lifted me onto the ledge and hoisted himself up beside me.

“We should camp out here,” he said, pushing my hair aside to kiss my neck.

One hand slid up my side to cup my breast, and I sighed, laying back while wrapping my arms around his shoulders so he'd be drawn down with me. He smiled and kept kissing his way across my jaw to reach my lips.

“We can pretend we're the only people in the world,” he said, his eyes dreamy in the shadowy grotto.

I didn't want to say it might be the only way we'd never have another fight. It seemed like every time we were separated something came between us. He noticed my furrowed brows and kissed me between my eyes before drawing back to look down at me.

“Ah, Karine,” he sighed. “I—”

I lifted my head to silence him with a kiss. “We're both learning about each other.”

“I want to keep learning,” he said, trailing the tip of his tongue down the front of my throat. He lifted up on his elbows and licked my nipples, then nipped at them in a way that made me shriek. He looked up at me and smiled. “So, that’s a yes, right?”

“Very much a yes,” I said. “Go ahead, keep learning.”

My heartbeat kicked up a notch when he kissed his way lower. He knew I liked where he was heading. His hands moved lower at a faster rate than his mouth, and soon, he slid his fingers between my thighs as his tongue dipped into my belly button.

I breathed deeply, wondering if I’d forever associate the smell of chlorine with the most incredible sensations. With the most amazing man. He was ready to learn and wanted to be a good husband. That was worth a lot to me, even more than his heartfelt apology.

I was shaking with desire by the time his mouth made it to the top of my thighs. Reaching down to smooth my hands over his short, damp hair, I couldn’t help myself and gave him a little nudge to hurry him along.

“Impatient?” he asked, teasing me by not moving at all.

I lifted my hips and dug my fingers into his shoulders. “Taste me, Roman,” I pleaded softly.

I had already learned how much he loved me to beg him to pleasure me. It was the complete opposite of what I thought it would feel like, begging him to do all the things I knew he also couldn’t wait to do. It was a rush, a surge of power.

“How much do you want it, little girl?” he asked, swiping his tongue lower. Not low enough. “Do you want me to lick your clit and make you scream?”

“Yes,” I sighed, writhing to get closer to his mouth. “Up and down my pussy and deep inside. Do it now, Roman.”

With a chuckle, he dipped between my thighs, taking me away with just the right amount of pressure against my swollen, aching nub. I moaned and pressed hard against his face. His hands clamped on either side of my hips and held me tight against the smooth grotto floor.

“Now you’re going to pay for being too impatient,” he said, grinning up at me.

I let my head drop back and stared at the twinkle lights while he drove me wild with every stroke of his tongue, gripping me hard whenever I tried to move. He was in complete control of my body, and I loved every second of what he was doing to me.

“I can’t—” I cried when his delectable teasing became too much. “Hurry up and get inside me.”

He shook his head without taking his tongue from my clit. My body trembled so hard it felt more like I was vibrating and about to leave the ground if he hadn’t been pinning me in place.

“Not until you come, little girl. Do what I say.”

I dug my fingers into his arms and pulled to no avail. “But I want to feel you inside me,” I said. “I need that big cock of yours.”

He paused, and I heard him mutter a curse word. A moment later, he pulled me up and flipped me over onto my knees. I felt a gentle slap against my ass, and then he yanked back to press against him, his cock pushing between my thighs. I reached down with one hand, my other arm shaking as I balanced on my knees, and ran my thumb back and forth across his dripping tip.

He spanked me again, a little bit harder this time, but still more of a tingling pleasure than any real pain. “Did you say you want to get fucked?” he asked, his palm sliding between my legs to cup me. He slid his hand back and forth, his breathing getting shorter and more ragged.

“Just as much as you want it,” I said, letting my head drop and bucking back towards him with every swipe of his palm. “Please, Roman.”

I looked back to see him smiling at me, and I shivered at the intention in his eyes. He gave me another light smack on the bottom as he caressed my pussy, back and forth between my thighs.

“I think you need to learn a lesson first,” he said. “Good little girls beg, but you’re being a bit demanding.”

I could tell he liked it and wanted more. I thrust my ass back toward him, moaning as he pressed harder against my wet heat. “Get inside me,” I demanded, holding my breath in anticipation.

The slap came as soon as the words were out of my mouth, and this time, he pushed his fingers deep inside me at the same time. I shook my head, panting as he pumped his fingers in and out.

“No, I need your cock.” I was too overwhelmed to turn to look at him but could tell by the way his cock pulsed between my thighs that he was about to burst. I reached for him again, wrapping my hand around his stiff shaft. “Put this in my tight little hole. You know you want to when you’ve got me so wet and slipper—”

That was the straw that broke the camel’s back. Or my husband’s resolve. With a growl, he gave me one last love tap and then drove his cock deep inside me from behind. My hair tumbled around my shoulders when my head dropped almost to the ground while he pumped me hard and fast.

With a sweep of his hand, he moved my hair onto my back, tugging so my head rose with it. He leaned across my back and kissed me, still holding onto my long hair so it wouldn’t flop around.

“I want to see your sexy tits bounce,” he said, reaching around to tweak my nipple.

The onslaught of his gravelly voice, his rough but tender touch, and that massive cock of his pounding away inside me was too much. My mouth fell open and my head thrashed. My arms shook, but it seemed like he was holding me up at this point.

“Is this what you wanted?” he demanded, driving deeper. “How does your pussy feel, baby?”

“So good,” I managed to say through my harsh gasps for breath. “Everything you do to me feels so, so good.”

His head dropped to my shoulder, and he groaned. “I need to come inside you. I need to do it now.”

I nodded, too weak to say another word. When he slid his hand across my belly and between my thighs, the slightest touch of his fingers against my clit drove me over the edge. My arms crumbled underneath me but Roman held on, strong enough to keep me close to him as I let go and gave in to one of his magic orgasms.

He kept thrusting, shouting out my name so that it echoed against the confines of the grotto, moving inside me until he couldn't anymore.

“Christ,” he said, kissing my back and lowering me carefully to the smooth, hard floor. “Wait, you can't lay on the rocks.”

He rolled onto his back and brought me with him so that I was laying across his chest. I could feel his heartbeat hammering against my breasts, and I dropped my head to his shoulder. “What was that? Did I deserve all those spankings?”

He tugged on my hair so I had to lift my face to see his smile. “I think the question is, did you love all those spankings.”

I was glad it was so dark in there because my cheeks flamed. “I guess,” I admitted, making him laugh.

No matter what I said, there was no denying how much I'd enjoyed that. After resting on top of him for a while, I

realized he was the one laying on the hard ground now. I got up and slid back into the pool.

“I’m hungry, and it’s getting cold,” I said in a school teacher’s voice.

He splashed in after me. “Yeah, I take back wanting to camp out here.”

In the main pool, he pulled me close, shaking his head. “Another time with no condom. That probably isn’t too smart,” he said, then kissed me before my frown could complete itself. “Not that I care.”

He wrapped his arms around me and carried me up the steps in the shallow end to settle us both on a lounge chair. I wrapped my arms around him, and he pushed all my soaking hair over my shoulder, trailing his fingers down my breast. My nipple puckered in the soft evening breeze, and he pulled me closer. It was all very romantic until my stomach growled like a freight train coming through the backyard.

With a snicker, he jumped up, his glorious body on full display like a statue of a Greek god. It’s one of the really buff ones.

“I’ll get us some food,” he said.

I was too languid to offer to help, and just lay there, naked as the day I was born, enjoying watching the stars popping out in the sky overhead. This was the life. If only things could hold out this way for more than twenty-four hours.

Roman returned, nudging me out of a light doze. He sat down next to me and shook out a blanket he had brought outside with him, covering both of us and setting a tray across our laps. He lifted the lid with a flourish to reveal two sandwiches almost too thick to get in my mouth unless I figured out a way to unhinge my jaw, fresh fruit, and a bottle of wine. As he unscrewed the cork, I began to nibble on a bite of cantaloupe.

“What should we toast to?” he asked, handing me a slender stemmed glass of white wine.

I leaned back and looked up at the twinkling sky. “How about the stars?” I asked.

He grumbled, but tapped my glass. “To the woman who outshines them,” he said.

“You can stop buttering me up,” I said. “I forgive you. You’d think that was obvious.”

With a smirk, he leaned over and kissed me. “You’d think it was obvious how crazy I am about you.” He paused, looking at me as if he was just now seeing me. After a few blinks, he looked at the tray of food, as if he was processing what he said.

I nestled in closer, taking him at face value, too tired and too satisfied to pick apart every expression on his face. He held up a grape, popping it in my mouth, then broke off a manageable bite of the fat sandwich for me. It was so dreamy and a bit corny, being fed a morsel at a time, but I loved every second of it.

I was so glad I made the first move to get us back on track. Now, to keep us there.

Chapter 15 - Roman

I kept feeding Karine bites of food, enjoying her reaction and somewhat shocked at my own. Yes, the sex was out of this world, but what was I doing, spouting out nonsense about her outshining the stars? The words just flew out of my mouth, as if my brain wasn't even involved. A pure, gut reaction that I had no control over. It was a struggle to maintain the upper hand I wasn't sure I wanted to win.

And that was dangerous. I was there for a reason and it wasn't to get emotionally attached. If only I wasn't so damn relaxed and ... happy.

When the night grew too chilly to sit out under the stars naked anymore, I wrapped her up in the blanket and carried her inside and upstairs. She made the same little show of not liking to be carried, but as soon as I held her tight, she nestled into my arms.

As we both got ready for bed, moving around each other in the bathroom and bedroom as if we'd already been married for years instead of weeks, she kept up an easy chatter, catching my eye or sliding her hand over my arm. Most of her shyness was completely gone.

I began to half wonder if I was the one being played. "Forgetting" the lunch with her father, getting so pissed off at me—though that was at least partly understandable since I'd crossed a line. I'd expected her to pout for days, but she sure did come downstairs to make peace fast enough.

Had she been ordered to, or was that just her true nature? I sure as hell couldn't figure her out, and it was a lot easier when I considered her a spoiled ice queen and not the sweet girl who was currently smiling at me in the mirror as she dabbed cream on her face.

Once we were snuggled down in bed together, she asked about Sergei again, and when she'd get to meet him. I

rolled away from her, propping myself on my elbow so I could better gauge the look on her face.

“Why are you so interested in my brother?” I asked. I tried to keep a neutral tone, but my hackles were up.

Sergei had no interest in meeting her, because, as far as he was concerned, she wasn't really my wife. And even though we'd been having an idyllic time, I needed to remember that except for a piece of paper that could be easily nullified, this whole thing was a sham and a means to an end. If she—and her father—kept pushing a meeting and Sergei kept refusing, the whole thing could collapse before I achieved my objective.

She sensed my tension, and her brows furrowed. “What's wrong with wanting to get to know my new family members? I want to know how you grew up, what kinds of things you used to do when you were kids. That's all.”

Now, I was definitely suspicious. In the last week she'd never mentioned Sergei, but after a visit with Feliks, she was all over it?

“I can tell you it wasn't anything like your pampered upbringing,” I snapped. “We didn't get anything handed to us just for existing.”

She was clearly hurt but I didn't care, as if it was somehow her fault that I'd never known my father. That she had any say in how her life had been. I was on the verge of being an ass again, but I didn't care. *Couldn't* care. It was easier to lash out at her than keep feeling that confusing warmth toward her. As if I was starting to like her.

She was my enemy, the same as Feliks, and for all I knew, she'd been told to dig into my past. I got distracted by our good times together, all that brilliant sex, and was losing sight of the fact it was all a ruse to manipulate her feelings. Now that she wanted to get close to me, for true or nefarious reasons, I refused to be manipulated in return and lose sight of the fact it was all fake.

That meant putting some distance between us for a while.

“Damn it,” I said, jumping up and making a big show of checking the time. “I forgot a West Coast call I still need to make. I might still be able to reach him.” I leaned over and kissed her, keeping a smile on my face. “Go on to sleep; I’ll be back as soon as I get this taken care of.”

“Oh, okay,” she said, touching her lip where I’d kissed her a bit too hard.

I turned away from the mild worry in her eyes, pretending to tap on a call as I hurried out of the room and acting like I was speaking to a business associate as I went down the hall toward the stairs.

In the kitchen, I poured myself some ice water and held it up to my brow before taking a few gulps. I needed to relax and keep it together, not pick fights. Since I had to assume the entire property might be bugged, I didn’t dare make a call to Evelina, so I messaged her instead. I ran regular programs on my cell phone to make sure it wasn’t being tracked or, cloned, or spied on in any way, so at least I felt safe doing that.

Is there any reason that Feliks might be suspicious of me?

I gulped down the rest of the cold water, waiting for her reply. It was barely ten o’clock, but she had a baby, so I hoped I wasn’t disturbing her if she was already asleep. It was odd enough having a sister I never knew about. Even more so that she was in the same city, barely a twenty-minute drive away, and I couldn’t visit her or get to know my nephew. Not yet, anyway. The time would come if I could pull this off.

My phone pinged, and I looked at Evelina’s reply.

Not that I know of. Stay on guard, and don’t give him any reasons, though.

I rolled my eyes at that obvious advice and thanked her, then deleted the messages. I remembered Oleg’s advice to schedule some time with Feliks and dialed my father-in-law

next. He was a night owl, so he answered right away, sounding as wide awake as if it was only noon and he still had the whole day ahead of him.

“Is anything wrong?” he asked.

“No, not at all,” I assured him. “Just finishing up some work now that Karine’s gone to bed.”

“I’m pleased to hear you’re making her a priority,” he said. “But I know how important work is, too.”

We exchanged a few minutes of small talk, nothing that was useful before I jumped in with my reason for calling.

“I was wondering if you wanted to get together for a game of golf sometime soon?”

“Got a new presentation for me?” he asked.

I frowned. If only all I wanted was to sell him on a new investment. “I could if you’re looking for something, but I really just wanted to catch up.”

Was I laying it on too thick? I was no actor, and to my ears, every word I said sounded like it was from some cheesy script. Feliks laughed and agreed he’d love a game, then said he’d get back to me with a time to meet at the golf club. We ended the call with a dumb joke about tee times and I set my phone next to me and rested my head on the table.

This was exhausting. But I’d done my job and it was clear Feliks wasn’t suspicious. Now I had to keep Karine from getting suspicious as well. She was still awake, propped up against the pillows with a book in her lap, idly twisting a strand of hair while her eyes scanned the pages.

As soon as she heard me in the doorway, she set her book aside and gave me a tentative smile. My heart did a little flip as I inwardly sighed.

“Do you really want to hear boring stories about my childhood?” I asked.

“I bet they’re not boring,” she said, her smile widening as she held out her arms to me.

So what if this part of the game was so enjoyable it felt like I was losing myself? So what if I was drawn to her like a stone tumbling down a mountain in a landslide with no ability to stop itself?

I curled up beside her, and she rested her head against my chest while I told her about the time Sergei and I had both run for student body president in sixth grade. It had been a vicious, ruthless battle where I’d framed him by continuously putting a whoopie cushion on our homeroom teacher’s desk, then making sure it was hanging out of the pocket of his backpack when she walked around the room while monitoring a test.

Karine laughed so hard that tears rolled down her cheeks, laughing harder when I showed her the scar on my arm where Sergei had broken it by shoving me off our neighbor’s camper when we were trying to spy on him because we were convinced he was a drug dealer. This was eighth grade when we were determined to go into law enforcement one day. That was the real laugh now.

“But why were you fighting on top of the van?” she asked.

I was stumped. “I can’t even remember. Probably over a girl—we’ve got the same type.”

“Oh, that’s why you don’t want him to meet me,” she said.

She was teasing, but I sighed. “No. He’s just busy. To be honest, it’s kind of pissing me off that he’s not prioritizing family right now.” She didn’t have to know I didn’t mean her family.

She leaned across my chest and kissed me. “I’ll stop bringing it up, then. Everything happened so fast, and most people are weirded out by arranged marriages. Don’t stress over it, Roman.”

God damn it, she was back to being sweet. I hugged her close and kissed her back. Going along with it.

She started to say something else but yawned, cutting herself off. I pressed her onto the pillow and pulled the sheets to her chin. "Get some sleep, baby," I told her, stroking her hairline until her eyes fluttered shut.

Once I heard her soft, even breathing, I rolled to the side and watched her sleep for a few minutes, trying not to get too comfortable again so that I forgot what was really important.

Chapter 16 - Karine

Another week passed with everything not just going smoothly, but great. It really was like everything I never dared to dream when I was little. When school friends would talk about how they might meet their future husbands or make lists of all the qualities they wanted in a man, I just nodded along, pretending I could relate. Of course, I'd never have any choice in who I married, and I always knew the way I'd meet my husband. My father would introduce him to me.

Those girls would have never understood. Arranged marriages always seemed old-fashioned to outsiders; some even considered them cruel. But it was what I was always destined to have, and I was more grateful than ever that I'd ended up with Roman.

He wasn't just so handsome. He took my breath away. Truly, I still wasn't used to that chiseled face or piercing blue eyes. He was kind, funny, and sweet, too. He'd been going out of his way to make me happy, and I had surpassed that. I was downright blissful.

I was waiting for him to get extravagant and the next time he told me I could choose to do whatever I wanted, I was going to suggest a trip out to California to meet his brother. Nothing formal. He could even pass it off as wanting to check in on his offices there. Just so long as they could have some time together again. I hated that they were in danger of becoming estranged because of me and my family's old-fashioned traditions. Once Sergei saw how happy Roman and I were together, he'd come around to accepting the strange way we got together.

Today was Roman's first full day off since our honeymoon vacation ended, and I was mildly bummed he was going to spend the afternoon golfing with my father. He'd promised the morning would be all mine, so I was downstairs

making him my famous pancakes as a surprise. I wanted our time together to be really special.

I snuck out of bed extra early and couldn't wait to see his face when I woke him up with a tray of fluffy buttermilk pancakes and freshly ground coffee. I sliced up an orange and set it on a small plate beside his main dish, then balanced everything on a tray that I carried upstairs, miraculously without sloshing any of the coffee or syrup by the time I got to our room.

I eased open the door, calling out, "Surprise!"

But I was the one who was surprised to find he was no longer under the covers, fast asleep. It was barely eight o'clock, but he came out of the bathroom dressed for work. I frowned at his dark gray suit pants and baby blue shirt that he was still buttoning up.

"Sorry," he said, kissing my forehead and taking the tray from me. "Damn, this all looks so good, too."

"It's your day off," I reminded him as he chose a red and blue striped tie and whipped it around his neck. For some bizarre reason, I loved watching him tie his ties. I'd tried to help him once and it had ended up looking like a blob around his neck, with the bottom part hanging lower than the top. He pretended I did a perfect job, all while stifling laughter.

He groaned. "An emergency meeting came up. We've got a new business that's on the verge of investing nearly two hundred and fifty million dollars into a new fund and their CFO is getting cold feet. I need to be there to warm them up again."

That sucked, but it was also a ton of money. "Yikes," I said. "I guess you have to go, then."

"I hate it. I promised the morning to you. Hey, I could cancel my golf game this afternoon and come home after the meeting if you want."

I put my arms around his neck and pressed my body close to his, still warm and smelling like spicy soap from his

recent shower. “I love that you’re a big, important businessman, so don’t feel bad about having to put out a fire at work. But you definitely shouldn’t cancel on my father. You’ll have fun playing golf,” I said when he grimaced.

“I’ll have more fun with you,” he said, giving me a kiss that had me melting against him. Then he smiled. “How about you join us at the club?”

Now, it was my turn to groan. As endearing as it was that Roman wanted to spend time with me, I couldn’t stand playing golf. No amount of love for my husband could get me to want to wither away in the hot Florida sunshine while my father spent interminable hours lining up his shots.

“I’ll be waiting for you when you get home,” I said, playfully reaching to squeeze his firm ass cheek.

He grinned and returned the favor and for a second we both forgot everything, getting lost in a sloppy kiss. When he pulled away, he looked a little dazed, but I was sure I did, too, and couldn’t stop grinning.

“Can’t wait to get rid of me all of a sudden?” he teased, grabbing up his gym bag with his golf clothes in it and hurrying toward the bedroom door.

“Just thinking about later,” I assured him, tracing my finger along the neckline of my nightgown.

He narrowed his eyes at me and looked torn. I finally shooed him down the stairs, waving over the balustrade as he left. “Don’t tire yourself out too much,” I called.

“I could have two broken legs and still get it up for you, baby,” he called back, sending me into a fit of giggles.

Seriously, how was I so happy? Also, what would I do with myself the rest of the morning? I’d already decided to spend the afternoon going back to the jewelry store where I’d asked the owner to put aside a watch Roman had been admiring. I was going to go back and have it engraved so it would be ready for our one-month anniversary. It was a silly thing to celebrate, and I still wasn’t sure what to have put on it,

but I knew it had to be perfect, because that was when I was going to tell Roman how I felt.

Because by now I was certain what I felt for him. I hoped he'd say it back to me, but if it was still too soon for him, I could tell by the way he acted that he was very, very close. It was enough for me for now, and we had a whole lifetime together. Plenty of time for him to make the same realization that I did.

Well, why not go to the jeweler early? They might be able to brainstorm something romantic to have engraved on the back of the watch, and then I could spend the rest of the morning shopping for some new lingerie that Roman hadn't seen yet.

I could probably stop by a few of my father's businesses, too, just to pop my head in and say hello since no one had seen me since the wedding. Many of our associates were almost as close as family, and I wanted to stay in touch with them. Being in our line of work was dangerous, and you never knew who you might never see again if something popped off with another family.

I shuddered as I got dressed in a casual skirt and breezy tank top. I didn't want to think about losing anyone when I'd been so giddy only a few minutes before. I didn't want my bubble of happiness to burst. It took me nearly half an hour to find the car keys, and I refused to be the kind of annoying wife who bothered her husband in meetings for something like that.

I was just about to give up and call for a ride when I found them in the last kitchen drawer I pulled open. Grabbing them, I headed toward the garage, humming one of the songs that had played at our wedding and trying to shake off the tension from the annoying search.

Before I reached the garage, a loud, banging noise rang out, deafening me. Seconds later, it seemed like the ceiling was caving in all around me. Before I could drop the keys and my purse to reach up to protect my head, something huge

crashed toward me. Oh my God, the ceiling was actually caving in.

“Roman!” I screamed, the very first thought in my panicked state.

A wooden beam struck me in the shoulder, forcing me to my knees. There was so much noise I couldn't hear my own shouts. More rubble crumbled all around me, clouds of dust choking off my cries for help. Something heavy hit me in the head, causing a burst of intense pain, but only for a second.

Then everything went dark.

Chapter 17 - Roman

I was so wrapped up in spy life that I almost forgot my own business even existed. The business my brother and I had worked tooth and nail to build, sacrificing our blood, sweat, and yes, even some tears, to get it off the ground.

And when my new client started freaking out about his multi-million dollar investment and demanded a meeting on my day off, I thought about telling him to go fuck himself for a minute. Was I so wrapped up in Karine, and wanting to spend the morning with her so desperately that I was willing to let a quarter of a billion dollars go? Sergei would kill me, and very painfully, so I sucked it up and got ready to go to work.

Karine was so cute, not wanting to let me go, but she understood and even seemed to admire how passionate I was about the firm. The last couple of weeks hadn't been hell. In fact, they were much closer to heaven than I could have hoped, and if this ruse turned into a long game, I had to admit I wouldn't be miserable.

The only problem was, that the more time I spent with Karine, the less I wanted to make her miserable. I no longer wanted to crush her heart and spirit. I had mistaken her shyness and reserve for coldness, but now I could see she was actually a very sweet and giving person.

A bloodthirsty mafia daughter, loyal to a fault, fiercely loving to those close to her. Nothing like I'd imagined. From our long talk sessions in bed every night, I learned that her privileged upbringing hadn't been all roses and sunshine, since she'd lost her mother at only thirteen. I could barely handle the grief when our mom passed away when we were thirty-five so I couldn't imagine how tough that would have been.

Feliks gave her every physical comfort but wasn't big on affection and had impossibly high expectations of her, which she tried as hard as she could to always meet. She'd

seen things while being raised in the Bratva that made me shudder, but none of it ever broke her.

Before I knew it, I was at my Miami apartment, still being used as an office since I didn't want to spend any extra time looking for a building. Too wrapped up in Karine. Just like now, when I'd spent the whole drive to the beach mooning over her when I should have been going over the selling points of the investment to calm my new client down.

I really needed to get my head back in the game. My own game, not the one to bring down the Drygas. As much as I wanted to prove myself to Oleg and be part of his life, I didn't want to destroy my own empire either.

Parking the car in my designated spot, I took a second to go over the specs, rifling through the contract to see what might have given the client pause. My phone rang, and since only a few contacts were allowed past the 'do not disturb' setting when I was about to head into a big meeting, I checked to see who it was.

The number for our home security company flashed on the screen, and I answered it.

"Sir, we're getting multiple alarms going off at your property," the security employee said in a somewhat bored, clipped voice.

No reason to panic, since sometimes the cameras went haywire when the trees blocked them, or maybe Karine had forgotten to turn off the window sensors when she wanted to get some fresh air. That's what I told myself, anyway.

"What kind of alarms?" I asked.

A split second with the sound of fingers tapping on a keyboard. When the employee answered, his tone was a little more urgent. "It looks like the fire department has just been dispatched, sir."

"What the hell?" I asked.

I didn't wait for an answer and instead pulled up the security app that would show live feeds of all our cameras. While I logged in, I told the phone to call Karine, but it rang through to voicemail. I hissed out a few choice curse words, still trying to get into the app. When I finally logged in, I was dismayed to find most of the views from inside the house were completely black, as if the cameras were off. Or disabled somehow.

This was bad. My heart began to pick up its pace as I switched to the views from the cameras at the end of the driveway, and the rapid beat of my heart seemed to stop for a second.

Half the house was caved in, as if a giant had smashed his fist into it. The kitchen, garage, dining room, and most of the living area. Just, gone. Smoke billowed from behind the house, and flames licked at the remaining walls.

I stared blankly at the screen for half a second, willing it to be a mistake. For the camera views to flicker and return to normal.

Karine. She hadn't answered her phone.

I slammed the car into gear again, tires screeching and the gears grinding as I tore out of the parking lot. Everything else was forgotten, but my ability to drive that car.

I had to get home and save Karine.

Chapter 18 - Karine

I came around with ringing in my ears and my whole body aching. The air around me reeked of smoke and dust, and everything seemed wreathed in moving shadows. The inside of my mouth felt like I'd been snacking on chalk, and I coughed when I tried to take in a big breath. Something weighed heavily on my back, and I couldn't fill my lungs, making me panic.

From what seemed like a great distance, I heard a voice make its way past the insistent ringing. "Hold still, we're trying to get you out. Don't move." A woman's voice, competing with the annoying mosquito buzz and what sounded like rushing water.

"Damn, these panels are heavy," another voice said.

"Solid oak," someone answered him. "She's probably alive because the contractor didn't cheap out on fiberboard cabinets. Kept the ceiling beam from squashing her like a bug."

A gloved hand swiped my dust-caked hair out of my eyes and patted a wet cloth across my eyes. Now I could make out the moving shadows as rescue workers. Paramedics and firefighters. Two men were hauling debris from all around me while the woman who'd helped me see better squatted beside me, patting my shoulder. Soon, the heavyweight was off my back and everyone started poking and prodding me.

"Can you feel this?"

"Are you hurt anywhere?"

"Can you move your legs?"

I took stock, my mind still reeling. What in the hell had happened? While I was sore all over, no particular body part seemed to be screaming in agony. Now that whatever had been

crushing me was gone and I could see, mostly hear, and breathe, I started to sit up.

Three sets of hands pushed me back down into the dust and debris, which I soon remembered was my house. I started to cry.

“Tell us what hurts,” one of the paramedics asked.

“My house is gone,” I answered.

“Ma’am, you’re lucky to be alive,” the woman admonished.

I wanted to tell them it wasn’t so much the house itself I was crying over; it was the beautiful memories that I’d been building with Roman. But she was right. I was lucky to be alive, and grateful that Roman hadn’t been at home. Craning my neck to better see the damage, I saw that firefighters were still directing their hose at some weak flames coming from what was left of the roof over the bedroom. I’d been in the kitchen and had the roof come down on me for some reason, but if he’d still been upstairs, he might have died from smoke inhalation.

I sat up again, swatting their hands away, then wiping the tears and grime from my cheeks. “I don’t think I’m really hurt,” I said. “What happened?”

They told me they didn’t know yet, and someone brought a stretcher over, insisting I go to the hospital. Dizzy and still having trouble breathing, I collapsed onto the gurney and stared at the blue sky and wispy clouds overhead as they loaded me onto the ambulance. I wanted Roman and tried to ask the guy who was attempting to hook me up to an IV if someone could call him.

“Just relax,” he said. “You’re going to be fine.”

I found the strength to sit up again. “I’m already fine. I want my husband.”

The poor paramedic stared at me like I’d risen from the dead, and I caught my reflection in the ambulance window. I

looked like a mummy who'd been rolled in soot and dust and had a crusty old blonde wig slapped on its head. I coughed again, and the man offered me a bottle of water.

Looking past the ambulance doors I got a full view of the house, or what was left of it. Not much, and the rest was still on fire.

“Can someone please call—” I stopped, seeing Roman's car skid to a halt outside the circle of emergency vehicles that had crammed into our driveway.

A police officer tried to stop him as he jumped out of the car and barreled toward the ruins, shouting my name. He shoved past the cop and a couple of firefighters and finally saw me in the ambulance. Even from twenty feet away, I could see the relief wash over him. I tried to wave, but a new bout of dizziness overtook me and I flopped backward onto the gurney again.

Roman leapt into the ambulance and hovered over me, grabbing my hand and stroking my face while the paramedic yelped at him to be careful.

“God, Karine,” Roman said.

“I'm okay, I think. What happened?”

He shook his head. “Don't worry about it right now. Let's get you checked out.”

He turned and started barking orders, wanting to know why I wasn't already on the way to the hospital. He refused to leave my side, daring anyone to turn him out with death glares I certainly wouldn't have argued with.

At the hospital, he stayed close, only getting shunted aside by a feisty ER nurse who didn't seem to be scared of anything or anyone, while I got x-rays taken. I got cleaned up and was given a hospital robe to replace my torn and filthy clothes. The ringing in my ears had mostly subsided, and the horror over what had happened to our home had also eased a bit after seeing how much Roman cared.

Once I was in a room, Roman appeared again, taking my hand and kissing it, then turned expectantly to the doctor.

“She’s certainly lucky,” the young intern said. “Only some cuts and bruises and a bump on the head. Nothing’s broken. We’re just going to keep you for some observation since you took that whack to the head,” she said, smiling at me. “But you shouldn’t be here too long. Just try and get some rest.”

I waited until she left to ask what happened. It felt like hours had passed since I’d been wheeled into the emergency room. “Did you talk to anyone? Does anyone know what’s going on?”

Roman scowled. “There’s going to be an in-depth investigation, but they’re saying it was a gas leak.”

I closed my eyes, letting that sink in. My memory right before the actual crashing sound and the whole world collapsing around me was hazy, but the earlier morning was as clear as a bell. I’d used the stove to make pancakes only about an hour before that, and everything had worked fine. There was no gas smell, no hissing sounds. And I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that I’d turned everything off properly because I was anal about that sort of thing. I’d also been in the kitchen searching for the car keys and would have noticed a random burner flickering away.

“That can’t be right,” I said. “I was—”

Roman shushed me, squeezing my hand. I couldn’t be mad at him when it was clear he was still shaken up with worry and only wanted me to rest, but I had to tell him what I thought.

“No, listen,” I said, but he leaned down and kissed me gently on the mouth.

“Karine, you need to rest. The goddamn ceiling fell on you. Please, baby, don’t make yourself sick.”

I nodded, closing my eyes against the harsh fluorescent overhead lights beaming down on me. I let him pet my hair

and make soothing sounds while I pretended to rest, but my mind was reeling as I wondered what could have so thoroughly destroyed our house.

The only thing I knew for sure was that it wasn't a simple gas leak.

Chapter 19 - Roman

Even though Karine was safe in the hospital, and the doctor had assured me she wasn't seriously hurt, I couldn't get my heart to stop racing. Or get the twisted knot in my stomach to release. My hand kept squeezing hers for the reassuring feeling of her own fingers tightening around mine, and I couldn't take my eyes off of her.

She was too worked up wondering what had happened, clearly heartbroken about the total destruction of the house. There was no way we'd be going back there any time soon. It would be easier to tear down the remaining walls and start over than try to renovate that disaster zone.

I wanted to tell her not to worry, that I'd buy her a bigger, better house, anywhere she wanted, but kept my lips clamped shut. This was no time to get sloppy. Still, I would have had to be a monster not to be upset.

Every time I closed my eyes, I saw her huddling in the ambulance, covered in debris, with the wreckage of that cursed house burning behind her. She'd been under all that just moments before I arrived. While she was getting her tests run, I'd been in contact with the firefighters who'd been on the scene, both to thank them and ask if they had any ideas about what happened.

They were convinced a gas leak had caused an explosion, and reiterated how lucky my wife was that she'd been in the exact right place or I'd certainly be a widower.

Karine's hand went limp in mine, and it seemed like she was finally asleep. Not wanting to wake her, I sat in the chair beside her bed, fighting a growing anger that I didn't quite understand the root cause of. It had to be some kind of reaction to the adrenaline that had been coursing through me from the moment I saw the camera feed of our house burning to the time it took to know that Karine was alive.

It was nothing like the rush from skydiving, and I leaned over, trying not to be sick.

That fucking house. I never should have accepted the shoddy mansion as a gift from Feliks. For all I knew, his corrupt builders had cut all manner of corners during construction. When I heard someone clearing his throat in the doorway, I looked up to see Feliks himself standing there. I had to force myself not to explode at his calm demeanor, just standing there with his expressionless gaze while his daughter lay in a hospital bed.

I took a deep breath. There was no way I could blow everything now. And maybe he wasn't as calm as he appeared. He was probably just used to catastrophes.

He stepped forward, turning to me. "Why weren't you at home?" he asked.

I bristled, taking it to mean I wasn't there to protect Karine. I didn't bother to explain because I wouldn't be able to keep my voice low enough with the rage that bubbled just below the surface. I didn't want to wake Karine.

I motioned toward the hall. "Let's go outside so we don't disturb her," I murmured.

As I stood up to step away, I noticed Karine stir in her sleep, reaching out her hand to me. I took it, sitting back down and giving Feliks a hard look.

"What do you know?" he asked.

"Gas leak," I told him in a low voice. "Nothing but a freak accident."

"I don't think so," he said. "This was an attack. It had to be the Morozovs."

"Impossible. No way," I said immediately. Feliks gave me a long, dark stare. Oh, shit. It sounded like I was defending them, because how could I possibly be so certain it wasn't them? "Why would they escalate?" I asked, trying to sound reasonable.

“We are bringing weapons and more men in soon,” he said.

My blood froze, but I didn't blink, didn't waver. “How can they know that, though? You don't think they're psychotic enough to burn down my house because I kicked Ivan's ass, do you?”

I didn't want Feliks thinking I was to blame in any way, but better to bring up the unfortunate nightclub incident than have him think I was a mole feeding the Morozovs information. It felt like forever before he shook his head, and I realized I was holding my breath. I let it out slowly.

“You never know,” Feliks said with a shrug. “You two will stay with me until the house is renovated.”

There was a slight pressure from Karine's hand, and when I glanced down at her, she very subtly shook her head, even though her face was still slack as if she was fast asleep. It seemed like this idea was as unsavory to her as it was to me.

“No, that's okay,” I said. “I still have my beach apartment. We'll stay there. No one knows about it since I've only been using it for my investment business. If this is really the Morozovs, we'll be safer there.”

Another gentle pressure from Karine's fingers told me I'd said the right thing, and I squeezed back. But even as I said the words, I wasn't sure who to trust. My damn house had just been blown to shreds. A house I just as easily could have been in when it happened. I had thrown myself headlong into this life based on a biological tie, but in truth, I knew very little about my so-called father. What if the Morozovs had been behind the attack?

Had they grown impatient with the spy game and gone ahead and tried to kill a Dryga to make a point? Had they tried to murder my wife?

I almost forgot I was in the middle of a conversation with Feliks and saw he didn't care much for my suggestion.

Despite reeling from my confused thoughts, I squared my shoulders.

“Karine’s safety is my first priority,” I said. “If the Morozovs are after us, I won’t have her be a sitting duck in a place where everyone knows you live. Nobody knows about my apartment.”

He grumbled for a solid thirty seconds before reluctantly agreeing. “I’ll have some guards placed discreetly nearby while I look into who was behind this,” he said, turning to leave.

“Start with the gas company,” I called after him.

I sat back down beside Karine and scraped my fingers through my hair, waiting for her to explain why she hadn’t wanted to stay at her father’s house. Her hand had loosened around mine and she really seemed to be asleep now, and I couldn’t bear to wake her just to ask unimportant questions. I also couldn’t bear to face my feelings, but they crowded in on me anyway.

There was no way the attack was from the Morozovs. It couldn’t be them. But if I found out it was...

What then?

Would I retaliate? And why would I do that?

Looking over at Karine’s sleeping face, still smudged with soot around the edges of her jaw, I saw how small and helpless she looked in the oversized hospital gown. Rage danced around the edges of my consciousness, looking for a reason to break free. Looking for a chance to take revenge on whoever put her in that position. Not exactly the revenge I signed up for, was it?

This wasn’t possible. Not just the Morozovs being behind the attack, but the strength of my urge to keep her safe. But why? She was my wife in name only. The wedding had been a setup, a ruse, from the very start. I wasn’t the sort to fall for someone so fast, let alone fall at all. I was the quintessential love ‘em and leave ‘em kind of guy, and I very

specifically looked for the type of women who also had no use for attachments.

But this felt like an attachment. Maybe something stronger than that.

Had I actually started to care about Karine Dryga, daughter of my father's enemy? Damn it. Had I started to fall in love with my wife?

Chapter 20 - Karine

I slept straight through the night despite the constant beeping from outside my room, the flickering exit sign over my door, and Roman continuously checking on me. I needed to recover, but my sleep was plagued with dreams that tried to put pieces of a puzzle together. None of the pieces fit. Nothing made sense.

My cousin Elise brought me clothes to wear home from the hospital: comfy, baggy jeans, a tank top, and a soft pink hoodie. She wanted to stay and help me get dressed, but while my body was nowhere near as tender as the day before, my mind felt like it was constantly being jabbed at.

Without being unkind, I snapped at Elise to go home. “I’m fine,” I told her wearily, unable to stand the hurt look in her eyes. But at the same time, I couldn’t have her around me. The only person I wanted close was Roman, and he hadn’t left me for a minute. “I’ll call you later,” I said to get her to leave. It was a half-hearted promise I wasn’t sure I would keep.

Roman looked me over, holding onto my shoulders like I might collapse in a heap. Just like our house had done. “You’re sure you’re okay to leave?”

Like everyone else’s, his voice still sounded like it was stuck behind a cloud of high-pitched mosquitos. I swallowed hard and shook my head to try to free my ears from the noise left behind from the massive explosion.

“Wait, you’re not ready?” he asked, trying to help me back to the bed.

I hid my impatience and nodded this time. “I’m just trying to get rid of the ringing.”

“That might take a while,” he said with a rueful smile.

They finally discharged me, and Roman kept being considerate, only asking if I was okay to walk when they

wheeled me out the hospital doors. He'd been keeping his thoughts about what had happened to himself and had refrained from asking me why I hadn't wanted to stay at Papa's house. I was grateful for that because the way everything was swirling in my head, I wasn't sure I could explain it to him in a way that would make sense, or that he would believe.

Not without proof, anyway.

Finally, we were heading towards Roman's apartment in South Beach. At first, I had felt a little jealous that he'd kept the place and seemed to be dragging his feet on finding an office building to use instead, but now I was glad we had a neutral place to go. When we were coming up to the turnoff to our neighborhood, I reached out and slapped the dashboard.

"I want to go to the house," I said.

Roman shook his head. "Baby, there's nothing in there worth getting. I'll buy you whatever you need, once you're safe in the apartment." He reached over and pressed his fingers against my wrist. "You don't need to worry. I'm going to hire some security on top of the guys your father's sending over."

He didn't look happy about the prospect of my father's security detail but I couldn't worry about that right now. Not until I knew for sure.

"I need to go to the house," I said more urgently. We were just about to reach the exit he'd need to take. I didn't want to wait. "Roman, I need to go to the house, now," I demanded, much too loud even to my ringing ears.

He nodded at the sound of my near hysteria and turned at the last second, heading through the gates to our neighborhood and along the winding, private road to our driveway.

He pulled up as close as he could get, and I got out, staring up at what was left of our home. The place was sodden from the fire hoses, and like I figured, it didn't seem like it would ever be in any shape to be lived in again. One entire

wing was completely collapsed, with nothing but piles of rubble. The perimeter from the top of our driveway all the way to the hedges on either side was cordoned off by yellow crime scene tape.

I stomped through the wet gravel and crushed shells, ducking under the tape to head to the path that led around back.

“I thought they were calling it an accident,” I said, when Roman merely snapped the tape from its post and followed me.

He shrugged. “They still have to do an investigation. Karine, what do you want to see this for?”

I didn’t answer, and began poking around in what was left of the backyard. Several palm trees had been toppled, their mighty fronds half buried in big chunks of cement wall and broken glass. I shook my head sadly when I saw the state of the once beautiful pool. The water was mud-brown and full of roof debris and bits of trees. The waterfall structure was cracked in two, one-half listing to the side while the other had fallen backward, revealing the system of pipes underneath.

I kicked aside what looked like bits of windowpane and bathroom tiles and leaned over, scanning the ground near what had been the outer edges of the house.

“This is dangerous,” Roman said, reaching for my hand. “Let’s get out of here.”

I ignored him and ducked away, completely focused on my task. Praying I was wrong.

But then I found it.

What I’d been hoping wasn’t there. It’s so tiny and nondescript that even a well-trained arson investigator might have missed it. They had before. I knew it well because I had seen it dozens of times before.

My hands shook almost uncontrollably as I reached for it and my vision blurred by the rush of tears as I held it out to

Roman.

“What is it?” he asked in a hushed tone, as if it was a tiger about to pounce. I met his gaze through the film of tears, but he only shook his head blankly.

“It’s a detonator,” I said, and once again, my voice was much too loud. This time, it wasn’t because of my ringing ears, though. I tried to explain without screaming, but the pain in my heart was beyond what I thought I could bear. “It’s one of Demian’s.” I finally broke down sobbing.

Roman pulled me into his arms, holding on tight. Not even his caring embrace could ease the pain. Everything around me was not only done on purpose but by the person I had considered my oldest and best friend.

My own organization had tried to kill me.

Chapter 21 - Roman

I held on tight as Karine was wracked with hysterical tears. The sound of her anguish ripped me into pieces. Seeing the tiny detonator, which I wouldn't have recognized in a million years, but she had honed right in on, gave me awful heebie-jeebies, like we were being watched by a serial killer.

“Come on,” I said, leading her back to the car.

I wanted to help her calm down, but I needed to get out of there as fast as possible. Blinded by her tears, she stumbled a few times, but I kept a firm arm around her shoulders.

“We don't know anything,” I said, helping her into the car.

Her chin hit her chest, her whole body shaking as she sobbed. I pulled the seatbelt out and reached across her to lock it in place, then tried to think of something to say or do to make things better. There was nothing. Nothing but to get to safety.

If a place like that even existed.

If that device was really what she seemed so sure it was, the situation was well and truly fucked. I kept my eyes trained on the road, wanting to put the pedal to the metal to get us to my apartment as fast as possible, but the last thing we needed was an accident or to get pulled over.

She had lapsed into silence by the time I pulled into my parking spot, and was close to unresponsive, only blinking at me sorrowfully when I held open her door. I ended up scooping her into my arms and carrying her to the elevator. She buried her face in my neck and started crying again in a less agitated manner, but with such sorrow that it nearly broke my heart.

Inside my place—our place now—I settled her on the couch and opened up a bottle of aged Scotch I'd been saving

for if and when that big deal I was trying to put together went through. Had the meeting to ease the investor's mind only been yesterday morning?

It seemed like half a lifetime ago, and I couldn't bring myself to care what had become of that. I poured a shot and handed it to Karine. She gulped it down in one swallow, grimacing through her tears. She handed the glass back to me and melted forward, resting her head on her knees.

I helplessly rubbed her back, searching for the right words. Of course, there were no right words. I despised that little prick from the beginning, but he'd been someone important to Karine. As much as it sickened me, I had to shove down my own feelings and focus on hers.

It was something I'd never done before, and the realization hit me with a jolt.

"Listen," I said, waiting for her to turn her tear-stained face to me.

"What?" she asked in a scratchy voice.

I jumped up to pour her a big glass of ice water, which she gratefully gulped down, then motioned for more Scotch. This time, I shook my head. As much as I recognized her desire to drown her pain, we needed to stay sober for whatever came next.

"At least we know your ex-boyfriend is off the rails. We'll take care of it. We'll tell your father together as soon as you're ready."

Those words were some I never thought I'd say, but the fear of losing her had knocked enough sense into me to know that whether or not I continued on my path to take down her father, Karine was no longer part of it.

I no longer had any desire to crush her heart, even though I also didn't think I had any hope of winning it now. Everything was much too convoluted for that. The best I could do now was keep her safe.

She shook her head hard enough that her hair tumbled over her shoulders and covered her face. She sat up and looked more distraught than ever. “You don’t understand,” she said, voice trembling as she struggled to hold back more tears. “First of all, Demian was never my boyfriend.”

“Okay,” I said, patting her hand. “That hardly matters now.”

“It matters to me. Truth matters to me, Roman. And anyway, he’s not off the rails.”

“What do you mean? He bombed our house.”

“He’s completely loyal to my father,” she said, breathing raggedly. She pressed her hand over her mouth, eyes wild. “One hundred percent. The only person who might be more loyal to my father than him is me.” The tears she was fighting won, her face crumpling as they fell.

“I still don’t get it,” I told her, reaching to push her hair back since strands were sticking to her wet cheeks.

She recoiled and swiped at her face, suddenly going the dead calm of barely controlled rage. “Demian wouldn’t have set off a bomb at our house unless he was ordered to do it.”

She spoke slowly through clenched teeth, and my whole body went cold. Did they know about me? Impossible. I had been beyond careful, and Evelina’s constant surveillance didn’t show any signs of Feliks being suspicious of me. No, it couldn’t be what Karine thought. There’s no way Feliks had ordered that hit because of me.

I had to hold myself still to keep from doubling over with guilt. If she was right, though...

If she was right and had died, then it was on me. My fault. Ultimately, I would have killed her.

“There’s no way,” I said, still unable to believe it. “You’re wrong about Demian acting on orders, and I’ll prove it.”

Praying I was right as my skin crawled with fear that my apartment would be the next thing to go up in flames, I pulled out my phone and dialed Feliks. I put it on speaker and set the phone on the couch between us.

“Roman,” he boomed. “Have you arrived at your place safely?”

“No,” I lied. “We’re at a hotel. I checked in under an alias.”

“That was smart,” he said. “Just so long as you keep Karine safe, it doesn’t matter where you are. How’s my little girl?”

I could tell by the concern in the old man’s voice that I was right, and when I looked at Karine she had relaxed a little. There was hope in her eyes where there had only been despair a moment before.

“She’s fine,” I said. “Resting right now.”

Karine nodded silently. She may have no longer believed her father had made the order, but she still didn’t want to talk to him.

“Where should I send security?” Feliks asked.

“I’ve got my own guys on it,” I said. “No need to send anyone right now.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, worry dripping from his voice.

“Positive. Oh, and Feliks?” I asked, reaching over and clasping Karine’s hand in mine. “If I ever see that little shit Demian again, I’ll kill him with my bare hands.”

“What’s gotten into you?” Feliks bellowed.

“Why don’t you look into it,” I said, ending the call with a jab of my finger. “See?” I said to Karine. “You were wrong about your father.”

She had to be, or else I’d been found out. And if I’d been found out, why risk hurting Karine when Feliks could

have just as easily lured me somewhere and shot me. I was going to meet the man for golf that afternoon, for God's sake. He could have done it then.

I had an almost overwhelming urge to tell her all that to put her at ease. It was one thing to be betrayed by a friend, but by the father she adored? Of course I couldn't tell her any of it because then I would lose her. Or she'd kill me herself.

I was beginning to think that was what I deserved. All I could do to redeem myself in any way was to keep her safe.

"We really need to move to a hotel," I said. "And soon."

She nodded, not needing me to spell it out for her that there was no one we could completely trust. We headed back down to the car, and I drove around the city for a while, keeping my eyes peeled for a tail. I didn't want to message Evelina, because as much as it pained me I couldn't trust the Morozovs either. Not when Karine's life might have still been in danger. For all I knew, something had gone south, and they were hanging me out to dry.

Was it just two months ago that I had lived the simple life of a billionaire investment specialist? I'd jumped right into a tank full of sharks, and now Karine was swimming along with me.

"I think we're okay," she said, craning her neck to look out the back window. "Nobody's been following us."

"You're probably right," I agreed. "Next hotel that doesn't look like it's got bedbugs."

I was trying to make her laugh, or even smile, but she only nodded wearily. "Maybe we can aim a little higher than that," she said.

"You got it. Better than bedbug-free."

I headed toward the airport and pulled into the first luxury hotel in the vast line up of them. After I checked us in, I came back to the car to collect her, grabbing the gun I kept in

the glove compartment and stashing it in the back waistband of my pants. We rode up the elevator in silence with our heads down. Karine had pulled the hood of her sweatshirt almost completely down to her nose and kept a tight grip on my hand until the elevator deposited us on our floor.

When I'd first started this endeavor, Evelina had advised me to get an anonymous credit card that I could refill as needed, to use in just such a situation. This was the first time I'd had to take advantage of that good advice and I was glad I hadn't been cheap when I charged it. There was no reason to scrimp, so I'd gotten us the best available suite.

"Oh, this is definitely better than bedbug free," she said when we got into the big, airy suite.

"I guess there's no reason to be uncomfortable when you're on the run," I said, setting the gun carefully on the bar before pulling her toward the plush seating area near sliding glass doors leading out to a balcony. "I don't know what kind of view we'll get out here, though."

To my surprise, as soon as we were settled on the loveseat, she threw her arms around me, practically crawling into my lap as she strangled me in a tight hug.

"Thank you," she breathed against my neck.

I slipped my arms around her and stroked her hair. "What for?" I asked.

She tipped her chin back to look at me with wide eyes, still bloodshot from all the crying. "You're the only person I can really trust," she said. "Thank you for being here for me."

Guilt stabbed through, but the delicate kisses she began to trail down the side of my neck soon made me forget. As she pressed closer to me, lighting me on fire with her eager movements, I forgot everything but how she felt and how much I wanted her.

Chapter 22 - Karine

Roman didn't have to say a thing. I knew he loved me now, beyond a shadow of a doubt. When I found the detonator, it felt like claws were digging into my chest to rip my heart out, certain that my father was behind the bomb that had destroyed my home.

Roman had taken me somewhere safe and even made my worst fears disappear, proving that my father had nothing to do with the attack. It still hurt that Demian had somehow done such a terrible thing, but that pain could be dealt with. I could eventually come to terms with that, especially after Papa figured it out and had him punished. That would also hurt, since Demian had been a friend, but Roman would be there for that, too.

I'd never been so certain of anything as Roman's love, and it made everything better. We were a team, driving around and making sure no one followed us, sneaking into a hotel like our own little gang of two. Nothing else mattered as long as we were together.

Once we were in our luxurious suite, all cool gray and white silk and linen fabric, with gleaming parquet tile floors under thick rugs, I had to tell him how I felt. Once it was just us, and I felt utterly safe again, I tried to find the right words.

Should I just blurt out that I loved him?

My tongue twisted and I thanked him for being there for me. Then I couldn't resist him another second and threw myself at him, trailing kisses down his throat. He'd done that so many times to me and it always made me break out in goosebumps and go wild for him. It seemed to have the same effect, and he tightened his grip on me, one hand sliding under my shirt to smooth his palm across my lower back.

I moved to straddle him on the gray velvet loveseat, and he tugged at my hair until my chin tipped back enough

that he could kiss me deeply and hungrily. I opened my mouth to him and ground against his stiff cock.

“Yes,” I moaned, rubbing back and forth. I wished I didn’t have the heavy, oversized jeans on, but I didn’t want to stop digging my fingers into his hard, muscular chest to get them off.

He seemed to read my mind and let go of my hair to drop his hands to my waist. A second later, he had the button undone and the zipper down, his fingers delving between my thighs.

“Better?” he asked with a smile that made me grind harder against him.

“Not yet,” I told him, jumping off his lap.

Shaking my head when he groaned, I let him know it was just long enough to shove the offending jeans down my legs, dragging my panties along with them. I kicked them all the way over to the kitchen area. He followed their trajectory, laughing when my panties landed on one of the leather barstools.

How were we laughing when our lives were in upheaval? Nothing mattered except getting back on his lap where that thick cock was waiting for me to ride. I was like a wild beast in a frenzy to claim what was mine. In the few seconds it took for me to undress, he’d gotten out of his own pants, and the thing I wanted more than anything stood up straight and proud.

I dropped to my knees between his legs and leaned over to blow out a hot breath across his pulsing shaft. His low growl of satisfaction made me smile, and feel even more savage. I wrapped my lips around the glistening tip of his cock, licking away the moisture and sighing with satisfaction.

“God, Karine,” he said.

Shaking with pent-up desire, I leaned back and stared him in the eyes. “Tell me what you want me to do,” I said. “The way you make me tell you.”

He laughed again, but his eyes were intent as he reached for me. His hand slid behind my neck to tangle in my hair. “You want me to beg you, little girl?”

I nodded. “That’s exactly what I want,” I said boldly. Hot color flooded up my cheeks and I added, “Please?” in a squeak that made him howl.

“Oh, baby, whatever makes you happy.”

Leaning over, he kissed me until I was limp, only held up by the firm hand behind my neck. “Suck my cock, Karine,” he said, low and rough against my mouth. “I need that so, so much.”

As soon as he leaned back with a smug look on his much too handsome face, I took him deep into my mouth, keeping my eyes trained on him as I rolled my lips up and down.

The smug look changed almost instantly. His eyes rolled back, and he groaned. “Worth it,” he muttered, stroking my hair while I continued to have my fun.

Soon, his leg muscles were tensing and his grip in my hair was almost uncomfortably tight. I wanted to keep going, but he grabbed me under my arms, sliding me up against his body.

“No,” I whined.

“Yes,” he purred, positioning me so I was straddling him again. “I need to be inside your pussy, Karine. I need to fuck that tight little hole, and I need to do it right now.”

I shivered, holding onto his shoulders as he gripped my hips and lowered me onto his cock. I was more than ready; I was dripping for him and I moaned with pleasure when he was sheathed deep inside me. Letting my head drop forward to rest against his neck, I breathed him in, tasting the salty sweat from his throat.

“Bounce for me, baby,” he said, releasing his tight hold so that his hands only rested lightly on my waist.

I loved controlling the movements, fast and hard, then slow, so slow. He was almost barely moving until I thought he might slip out, then I slammed back down again. When I cried out, he grabbed me, slowing my ferocious movements.

“It doesn’t hurt,” I said breathlessly. “It feels...”

He held me still, pulsing deep inside me while he trailed his fingers down my breasts. His eyes followed their path as he paused to tweak my nipples to tight peaks. Lower and lower until he finally pushed his fingers between the place where our bodies were joined. He hovered them tantalizingly as I waited, holding my breath for what I knew was about to happen.

“Please,” I said, looking into his deep blue eyes.

He licked his lips and nodded, pressing against my clit. That was all it took. Just that intense gaze and the slightest touch of his expert fingers. My body tensed as it was flooded with pure pleasure. My mind took a mini vacation as my mouth fell open, and a scream burst free. He wouldn’t stop until I was gasping, clawing at his shoulders. Was I leaving marks? Would he even care?

I leaned down to sink my teeth into whatever flesh I could find, but then he flipped me onto my back. I locked my ankles around his hips as he drove hard and fast inside me. Soon, I couldn’t hold on anymore, and when my hands fell to my sides, he roared, plunging deeply one last time.

As his movements slowed, I opened my eyes. He dropped his head to my shoulder and eventually, his body gave out, collapsing on top of me.

“Karine,” he groaned. “What do you do to me?”

“I think the same thing you do to me,” I told him, barely enough strength left in me to get the words out.

He kissed my neck and rolled sideways so he wasn’t crushing me with his big body, and after a few moments of heavy breathing, he chuckled. “There’s no way we’re falling asleep all crammed onto this tiny couch.”

“Then let’s get to bed,” I said.

He nodded and with a sound like he was trying to move a freight train, he dragged himself to standing. I laughed and held my arms out to him.

“You’re going to make me carry you when you just drained me dry?” he asked.

“It’s ten feet,” I told him.

Once again, I wondered how I could be so happy when my life—our life—was in upheaval. There was more magic in Roman than just his fingertips, it seemed. The worry and fear were still there, but very far away as long as he was near.

With a big, heart-wrenching smile, he leaned down and dragged me into his arms. He made it all ten feet to the bed, where he dropped me on top of the covers. I scurried up to pull the bedspread and the sheets down, fluffing up the pillows.

“Now you’re full of energy,” he said. “How about another round?”

I fell onto my back and held out my arms in invitation. “Come and get it.”

Chapter 23 - Roman

As soon as Karine fell asleep after round two, I found a private security firm and paid a fortune to get one of their best men out to us immediately. I stayed in bed, wide awake, until I got the alert that he was stationed down the hall, and fully aware that real danger might be heading his way. He seemed excited about it, ready to go. It was only then that I could fall asleep, cradling Karine in my arms.

It was only a few hours before the sun peeked in through a space in the blackout curtains, waking me up again. As much as I would have liked falling back to sleep next to her again, or better yet, waking her up with slow, lazy kisses, there were things to get done.

I watched the gentle rise and fall of her chest for a few minutes and smiled at her slightly parted lips. The way her long, dark lashes rested against the tops of her cheeks was indescribable. It made me yearn for something I couldn't understand. Wasn't sure I wanted to understand.

Certain that it could only lead to heartache.

Pushing all feelings aside, I snuck out of bed and quietly got dressed to go out. I scribbled a note for Karine in case she woke up while I was gone, telling her to stay put and that I wouldn't be gone long. Hopefully, I could be quick and would be back before she was awake.

After I checked in with my security guy down the hall, I headed down the elevator, sweeping the lobby before coming out of the shadows to stride toward the door. No one gave me a passing glance and I kept walking down the street, deciding not to take my car. Everyone on both sides knew what I drove, and it seemed safer and less conspicuous to be a pedestrian.

Since we were out by the airport, there weren't the same kinds of crowds that gathered near the beach, but by the time I wandered about four blocks from my hotel, I found a

street that had several coffee shops and convenience stores mixed in between the nondescript office buildings.

I stopped at a busy café next door where I didn't think I'd be noticed or overheard. I ordered a black coffee using a fake name and sat at one of the only open tables near the back. While I waited for my coffee, I kept a wary eye on my surroundings, but nobody seemed suspicious. Just a bunch of early-morning commuters enjoying a hit of caffeine before they went to work.

Pulling out my phone, I turned it on. I'd kept it off since we fled my apartment the night before and a wave of messages appeared after it booted up. I ignored them and called Evelina, still not sure how much I was going to tell her.

“What the hell?” she asked by way of a greeting. “Why would you go dark like that after the house you were staying at got blown up?”

I was briefly surprised that she already knew about that but then I remembered who she was and her area of expertise. She'd been keeping tabs on me since I got here. That had been comforting until I started wondering if my new family members could really be trusted.

The anxiety over my welfare rang out in her voice as she continued to tell me how worried everyone had been. She even asked if I wanted to give our father another heart attack.

“Of course not,” I said.

She sighed. “If you want out, say the word. No one will blame you now that shit's getting real. I can have someone come and pick you up right away.”

Now that I was certain that the Morozovs weren't behind the attack, at least as certain as I could be about anything at the moment, I told her no way. “I'm still in,” I said firmly. “But how do you know where I'm at?”

She snorted. “We didn't come for you sooner because we figured you had it under control. Even though Papa was

going nuts, I didn't want to bust in and make everything worse."

Well, so much for thinking I was being stealthy last night, driving around aimlessly to throw off anyone following. I forgot all about the fact my sister was able to hack into just about any camera anywhere in the world at the drop of a hat. I probably should have gotten a different car before we took off.

"Okay, so you know everything," I grumbled.

"Not who was behind the attack," she admitted.

"That's something I do know." I filled her in on Demian, and she freaked out harder than I expected.

"Don't tell me you're relying on Feliks for security when one of his own has gone rogue," she said. "Why the hell wouldn't you call us? I could have had an army out to you in an hour or less."

She muttered a few insults in Russian, thinking I wouldn't understand. I did, but could tell her frustration came from a place of caring, and I didn't want to admit I hadn't trusted her for a while.

"I hired someone from a local company," I said to calm her down. It didn't work.

"Some private security hack won't be a match for a trained Bratva assassin," she yelled. "If I figured out where you are, there's at least a chance someone else did, too. If they want to come after you again, you're screwed with some rent-a-cop."

If she was right—who was I kidding, of course she was right. She was born into this. I was a newbie, screwing up left and right. Fully freaking out, I told her I had to go. I had to get back to the hotel and make sure Karine was all right. What was I thinking, leaving her like that? Why didn't I just make my damn phone call from the balcony or the hotel lobby?

The whole sprint back I berated myself, praying my secret agenda hadn't gotten Karine in a dangerous situation.

Again. Even though I was running flat out and I'd only gone about four blocks away, it felt like it took forever to get back to the hotel. I forced myself to walk as normally as possible through the lobby, jamming on the elevator button until it arrived.

Once the doors slid open on our floor, everything seemed calm, and I was able to breathe easier, heading to the end of the hall where the guard was posted. But once I turned the corner, the guard was no longer there. And I was no longer breathing easily.

What was there was a very distinct trail of blood leading to the emergency stairwell. Frozen with shock, I stared at the heavy door for a split second, then turned and raced back to our room. Slamming into it and cranking the handle, I realized it was still locked.

That should have calmed me down. Nothing was wrong if she was still locked inside the room. Maybe that wasn't blood on the carpet down the hall. Maybe the guard was on a piss break.

I fumbled the key card out of my pocket and swiped it, shoving the door open hard enough that it bounced against the wall inside and careened back toward me. I kicked it and shoved my way inside. Nothing was overturned, and there was no sign of a struggle. There was also no Karine. I double-checked the bathroom and the balcony, even the big, empty walk-in closet. She was gone.

Nearly blind with terror, I raced back to the emergency stairs, still hearing Evelina's voice in my ear about things getting real. Turning the handle, I pushed open the door, expecting a horror movie-style creak, but it slid open easily on well-oiled hinges. Stepping through onto the cement landing, I looked down the first flight of stairs. My guard lay in a heap on the landing below with a tidy bullet hole through the center of his forehead.

A noise like a wild animal in pain rose up in the small space, and I realized it was coming from me. I went ballistic,

hurtling back into the hotel room to try to come to my senses enough to figure out what to do.

If there was anything to be done.

Karine was gone. But did someone take her or had she somehow found out the worst and left on her own? I wouldn't put it past her to kill the guard if he tried to stop her, and if she found out the real reason I'd married her, nothing could have stood in her way.

I sunk to the ground, feeling like the wind had been knocked out of me. I had to find her. If she was in trouble, I had to help. If she had run—then I'd just have to face her wrath, even if it ended up being the last thing I ever did.

Chapter 24 - Karine

I rolled over in the strange bed, everything coming back to me as soon as the sunlight hit my eyes. I squinted and rolled back, reaching for Roman. He'd make me forget again.

Except he wasn't there, and I had a moment of panic before I saw the note he left on his pillow. He'd also left the gun next to the note, which made me feel better about being alone. The note only told me to stay put and that he'd be back soon, but I had no idea when he'd left.

I was starving, realizing I couldn't remember the last time I ate. Since we drove around so long the night before to put anyone who might have been following off our trail, I figured it would be safe to order room service. I could sign it to the room and have them leave it outside the door. Perfectly safe.

Since Roman was supposed to be back at any time, I ordered a double serving and a pot of coffee to be sent up, then headed to get a shower while I waited. It was only a few minutes after I hung up and I was still working the tangles out of my hair when there was a knock at the door.

I hadn't ordered anything fancy, just toast, fruit, and coffee, and it was a pretty swanky hotel, so I figured it was just exemplary service and headed to the door.

"You can leave it outside," I called, peering through the peephole but not seeing anyone, just a shadow in the hall.

"Need a signature," the shadow grunted.

I double checked the safety bar and wedged my foot against the bottom of the door for good measure, then opened it just enough for the server to be able to slide the ticket through. I peered through the crack, horrified to see Demian standing there.

“Please just talk to me for a second,” he pleaded, holding up his hands.

He looked like hell, tired and dirty, with dark circles ringing his eyes. A tiny, distant part of my heart remembered how we used to play as children. Carefree and innocent and always there for each other. Then a bigger part remembered my ruined home and that signature detonator of his. The feeling of the roof crumbling down around me. How lucky I was not to be dead.

I rolled my aching shoulders and started to slam the door in his face and then call for help, but he leaned against it, wedging his foot into the small space and making it bigger. The safety bar slid open to its furthest point with a metallic clack. He didn't start slamming on the door or try to force his way in. He just stood there looking pathetic.

“Please, Kar,” he said. “Please let me talk to you. Just listen to what I have to say. Give me five minutes, please.”

I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes. “What in the hell?” I demanded. “What can you possibly have to say? You know when my father finds out what you did, you're as good as dead, right? So why are you wasting your last hours on earth looking for time with me that I'm absolutely not going to give you?”

He shook his head sadly, as if he pitied me. “Stop being so naive. I didn't act on my own. You know full well I was ordered to set those bombs, and yes, your father knew you might be in the house.” His hand curled around the door, and he pressed his face into the crack. “It was messed up, but I've seen the light. I'm choosing sides now. Your side.”

All of his words landed like small bombs, each one exploding a bit more of my patience and compassion. He knew me as well as anyone on this earth, so he knew how much I hated lies. I'd heard my father's voice last night, heard the concern, and knew that he wasn't part of Demian's perfidy.

“Fuck off,” I said, pushing harder on the door, not caring if I broke his hand.

His little speech hadn’t moved me, but the next words twisted my heart into knots.

“Your husband is a Morozov,” he said, pushing back to keep me from shutting the door. “Maybe not raised as one, but he’s acting with them.”

“Shut up,” I said. I turned and raced to the bed where the gun still lay on the pillow where Roman’s head had rested. Back at the door, I raised it and aimed it at Demian’s face. “Get out of here before I shoot you.”

“I’m not armed, Karine,” he said, staring down my gun. I snorted, believing that about as much as I thought Roman was a Morozov. “I’m not,” he repeated. “And you are. So, just let me in, and I can prove it to you.”

Hell, I did have the gun. But was I falling for his filthy lies? It was just that he seemed so calm and sure of himself. So confident in his words.

“Stand back and prove you’re not carrying,” I said.

He took a step back and lifted his shirt, turning in a circle so I could see there was nothing in his waistband.

“Now will you let me come in so I can show you what your pig of a husband really is?”

Anger boiled within me. Why let him get away with what he’d done, with the horrible things he was trying to make me believe? I had the gun. I was in charge.

I unlatched the safety bar and pulled the door open, keeping the gun at my side, but releasing the safety on that as well. I stepped back, and Demian slowly came into the room, looking almost convincingly sincere.

But I knew Roman. Maybe not as long as I’d known Demian, but I knew his true heart. My husband loved me and kept me safe, and I trusted that he would keep doing that. There was no way he was my enemy. No possible way.

My enemy was here in front of me now, and it was time I made him pay. As I raised the gun to point it at him once again, he lashed out, faster than a rattlesnake. Knocking the gun out of my hand with a force that snapped my arm back, he ducked down and pulled his own gun out of a hidden ankle holster, swinging it toward me. I heard the crack of the handle hitting the side of my head a split second before the pain made me sink to the floor.

“Why’d you have to be such an idiot, Karine?” Demian said, as I hit the carpet and blacked out.

Chapter 25 - Roman

No longer concerned with secrecy, I called Evelina while I paced the hotel suite with the energy of a caged lion. The need to retaliate, and hunt whoever had taken Karine, was so powerful it made it difficult to catch a full breath.

“You have to calm down,” Evelina told me.

“The hell I do,” I snapped, my fist clenching. “Tell me again why I’m in this hotel room waiting for you?”

“Because you need backup,” she said. “You were never in this alone. We’re on our way.”

It might have only been twenty minutes, it might have been ten days before Evelina and her husband Mikhail arrived with a team. Time had ceased to have any meaning, and I could only stare in shock when Mikhail clapped me on the shoulder.

“Snap out of it,” he urged quietly while their people were dispatched to the stairwell to check on the guard I hired to protect us.

This was my first time meeting my brother-in-law. He was about my height and a few years older, with a smattering of gray at his temples. His grip was firm and reassuring, and I shook off the stupor of fear, unclenching my fists for the first time since I was at the hotel. I got back to the hotel and nodded, taking a breath. The experts had arrived.

“You’ll get your chance to deal with whoever took Karine when we find them,” Mikhail said.

“If anyone took her,” Evelina said, looking over the room. Nothing was out of order. “Does it look like there was a struggle in here?”

Her medium-length dark hair was scraped back in a slick ponytail at the nape of her neck. When she shrugged out of her form-fitting jacket, she had two slim guns strapped to

her sides in a holster that crisscrossed her back. Her eyes scanned the room that looked like we'd just checked in, and I could understand why she was skeptical that my wife might have been taken.

I remembered how easily Karine had brought me down on the night after our wedding. She was a capable and well-trained fighter. She'd also gotten the drop on me because I was unaware of her skills, and I had easily gotten the upper hand back because I was a foot taller than her and outweighed her by maybe a hundred pounds. Skills were one thing; brute strength was another.

"She used to be best friends with this guy," I said.

If Demian had come here with a sob story, her tender heart might have relented so that she opened the door. Thinking about what might have happened next had me clenching my fists again.

Evelina looked at me with pity. "You didn't tell her he was the one who put her in the hospital and destroyed her house?"

Things were looking more and more like Karine had walked out on her own. "She was the one who figured it out," I admitted, pressing my knuckles into my eye sockets. A headache was brewing that I had no time for.

The two men who'd come with them returned to the room looking grim. "Security guard's dead," one said. "Poor bastard didn't see it coming."

"Take care of it," Mikhail said, stone cold in face and voice. He looked at me with a slight shrug. "This wasn't your fault, but we can't have the police sniffing around. We'll have to dump him somewhere."

Clearly, I wouldn't win this argument, so I didn't try. If there was one thing the Bratva didn't like, it was unnecessary police involvement, whether they were innocent or not. There was no time to feel bad for the unlucky soul who happened to

be on duty when I called his firm. Evelina was still scrutinizing the distinct lack of a struggle in the room.

“She didn’t have her cell phone,” I said. “It was lost in the explosion. And she was wearing flip-flops for God’s sake, and clothes that were two sizes too big on her. No money, no cards. She wouldn’t have left on her own.

Evelina’s pitying look turned to worry. “Do you think she could have figured you out? I don’t think it would have mattered if she was in a bathrobe. She would have bounced if word got to her who you really are.” She must have noticed the pain I was experiencing because she reached to touch my shoulder. The calm in her voice was forced. “If that’s the case, Roman, we need to get you out of Miami. There’s sure to be a hit out on you by now.”

Mikhail got on his phone, ordering his plane to be ready to take off as soon as possible without even looking my way.

“I don’t think so,” I said slowly. Something in my gut told me that wasn’t the case at all, but I didn’t know how to confess to my sister and her badass Bratva husband that I had fallen in love with my fake wife. I had convinced myself she was also in love with me. “How do we explain the security guard? My gun’s—”

I’d completely forgotten the gun I left with Karine. Mikhail perked up at this new information. “She had a gun?”

I was trying to say it was still in the room, but it wasn’t on the pillow where I’d left it. Not on the counter, either. The three of us did a quick but thorough search. No gun anywhere.

“She found out, popped your guard, and called her daddy,” Mikhail said.

A low, desolate sound rose up my throat and out of my mouth as I shook my head. “I don’t think so,” I repeated, locking eyes with my sister.

Evelina’s expression changed. Just like a real sister, I might have known for her entire life, she seemed to understand

where my pain was coming from.

“It won’t hurt to try to find her, just to make sure,” she said.

“Are you serious?” Mikhail asked.

She laid her hand on his wrist. “We can’t act rashly without all the information either way. If Karine’s been taken against her will, that means Roman’s cover probably isn’t blown. If he leaves the country while she’s missing, he’s outing himself, and we’ve lost a man on the inside.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “If we rescue her, I’m a hero.”

Evelina rolled her eyes. “Slow down there. We’re going to investigate this, try to get the hotel security cams and go from there.”

“You’re willing to risk your life on a hunch?” Mikhail asked.

It was only a hunch. A whim. A fervent hope. “Yes,” I said without hesitation. I was going to find Karine.

“Well, you need somewhere else to hide out,” he said, accepting the new direction we were taking things with ease. “It’s definitely not safe to take you to our house.”

“We’ll leave you with one of our cars,” Evelina said, pulling out a set of keys from her pocket and tossing them to me. She told me the make and model and roughly where they’d parked it. “When you find a new place, let me know.”

They hurried out to take care of their end of things. “What can I do to help?” I called.

Evelina stopped in the doorway and shrugged, but gave me a sympathetic look. “All you can really do right now is get yourself somewhere safe and wait. And keep your damn phone on, for God’s sake.”

With that, they were gone. A moment later I headed down to the parking garage and found the nondescript black sedan with Georgia plates. Now I was nothing more than a

tourist. If I maintained the speed limit and got a little bit lucky, I could disappear without a trace until we knew more about what was happening.

Knowing it was futile, I drove around the area, up and down side streets and through residential areas, keeping my eyes peeled for Karine. If she'd left on foot, she wouldn't have gotten far and I prayed I'd see her walking somewhere.

The idea that she knew the truth and despised me turned my stomach and chilled my blood. But if she really did run away from me, it meant she wasn't in danger. That was something to cling to, even if it meant she'd never want to see me again unless she was pointing a gun at my head.

For the moment, all I could do was lay low and keep looking. And hope that she was all right.

Chapter 26 - Karine

I woke up once again with a throbbing headache, the second time in how many days? It seemed like months since the explosion. I was lying in a bed that I could tell right away wasn't the thick, firm mattress at the hotel. A spring stabbed into my side, and the distinct, musty smell of a Florida house that hadn't been lived in for a while filled my nostrils. The sounds of a window air conditioning unit rattled and whirred somewhere close by, working overtime to cool wherever I was.

When the rush of nausea subsided from waking up, I cracked open my eyes. A dusty glass lamp sat on a stool beside the bed and beyond that there was faded green and white striped wallpaper. Somewhat familiar but definitely not the hotel.

How long had I been out? If I wasn't in so much pain I would have indulged the anger that welled up over Demian not only knocking me out, but taking me somewhere against my will. Only wanted to talk, my ass.

With a groan that I quickly stifled so he wouldn't come in to check on me if he was even around, I rolled over to get a better sense of where I was. That's when I realized my left hand was tightly cuffed to the metal bed frame. The slight movement caused the cuff to pinch my wrist and the chain it was attached to rattled and clanged, seemingly loud enough to wake the dead.

I froze, but a few moments passed with no noises outside the small room I was in and I looked around again. It seemed like late afternoon based on the sun outside the tiny window, half-shaded by green checked curtains. A few cheap wooden picture frames showcasing the photos they'd been sold with were hung on one wall. A half-hearted attempt to make the place comfortable.

I was at one of my father's safe houses, way out in the country, in a lonely stretch of land between the Everglades and one of the wildlife preserves. I was here about a year ago, bringing homemade cookies to a couple of our guys who were laying low after taking out an especially high profile lawyer for my father.

Besides being cuffed to the bed, which enraged me, I was otherwise free to move around, and the chain attached to the handcuff allowed me to sit up at least. On the other side of the bed was a pitcher of water on a rickety side table with a doily on it to catch the condensation.

My throat was parched, but I didn't dare take a sip. I didn't trust Demian not to drug me after what he'd already put me through. What had he said right before I passed out from the blow to the head he dealt me?

Oh, yeah, that I was an idiot. In this particular instance, he was right, but it still chafed my feelings on top of everything else. Some friend he turned out to be.

I must have made too much noise, because I heard footsteps in the hallway outside my room. I got in as defensive of a position as possible without the use of my left hand and stared at the door with a defiant scowl when he shoved it open.

"Well, hello, sleepyhead," Demian said, grinning in a way that made me start to inwardly shake.

I didn't know this person at all. Not anymore.

Forcing myself to pretend I wasn't tied to a bed and quaking with fear, and that we were still old friends, I smiled in return. The last thing I wanted was to incite another outburst where he felt the need to hit me again.

"So, why did you think it was a good idea to bring me to one of my father's houses if you're on the run from him like you said?" I asked, my fake teasing tone making my stomach churn worse than the headache. The headache he gave me.

His grin never faltered. He sat on the edge of the bed near my feet and it took all my willpower not to drag them

away. “For now, I’m playing both sides to see which one suits me better,” he said. “I can always make it look like I’m rescuing you from the big bad Morozovs if I have to.”

I shook my head at him, unable to hide my disgust. As much as it was killing me to learn my father really might have been behind the order to bomb my house, nothing could shake my belief in Roman.

“Still trying to sell that part of your fairytale?” I asked.

“Oh, Karine.” He snickered. “That part wasn’t a lie.”

“So you admit any of it was a lie?” I leaned forward, hoping to trip him up.

“Stop deflecting. It’s time you see the proof of what you married. What you’ve been letting fuck you all these weeks.”

I recoiled back to the edge of the headboard, horrified by the way he was talking to me. He left the room, returning a few seconds later with a sheaf of papers. He thrust them at me, but I refused to take them. Coming closer, he smashed them against my chest so that they crumpled.

“Read them,” he demanded. “Right now. Then you can stop being in denial and get over it. Get over him.”

When he stepped back, the pages fell onto my lap. At a glance, I could see they were printouts of emails. Demian refused to leave, continuing to tower over me beside the bed. He looked worse than he did when he showed up at the hotel, his hair greasy and sticking up in clumps. There was a ketchup stain on his shirt. At least, I hoped it was only ketchup.

“Give me a little space,” I said weakly, rubbing the side of my head. “Did you really need to hit me so hard?”

He backed up, looking convincingly chagrined. Such a good liar. I decided to read the emails and disprove the lie he was trying to feed me about Roman.

Except, as I scanned the emails, it was clear right away that he was telling the truth. The messages weren’t from

Roman, but from his brother Sergei. To Oleg Morozov. He was a powerful man back in Russia, and it was his nephews who ruled Miami with an iron fist and who we were trying to topple. He had a daughter named Evelina, who constantly gave us trouble, a son who was based in New York.

And now it seemed he had two more sons we hadn't known about. A sense of despair settled over me as I began to read the first email from Sergei.

Since I've learned you were our biological father, I've had a lot of mixed emotions. I'm not one to jump into things the way Roman is. Unlike him, I don't want anything to do with your businesses, either legal or otherwise. If this is a problem to you, then consider that you've only got one son and don't contact me.

But if you can accept that, then perhaps we can meet.

It was signed very formally with Sergei's full name. Oleg wrote back.

While I'm thrilled that Roman wants to help our family business in any way he can, rest assured I'd be as welcoming to him if he didn't. Family is the most important thing to me. I cared for your mother and have deep regrets that...

I stopped reading, the small print going blurry through my tears. I blinked them away and looked up at Demian. The pity on his face was genuine.

"Look at the dates, Karine," he said.

Frowning, I scanned to the top of Sergei's first email to Oleg Morozov. His father. Roman's father. If I thought I knew what agony was a few seconds ago, those awful feelings couldn't compare to the pain that ripped through me. The message was sent before my wedding. Before Papa had told me, I was to marry Roman.

"He knew before," I whispered, the first tear falling onto the paper in my hands. I angrily swiped it away. "He let me go through with it." I couldn't say aloud or admit to myself that he had set it up.

“I tried to help you get away,” Demian said, unable to keep a self-satisfied grin off his face.

“You only offered because you wanted me for yourself,” I snapped.

The pain became unbearable, dwarfing the aches left over from the explosion, making my throbbing headache recede into the background. I pressed my face against my knees, struggling to breathe. He’d known. My father set me up. Roman had set me up. Betrayals from all sides. I bit my lip hard enough to taste blood. I had to concentrate on my anger. That was easier than the feeling that my heart had been stamped into the mud by the two men I’d trusted with my life.

“He almost got away with it,” Demian said, as if I wasn’t about to die from heartbreak. “He hid his identity well, though it was easy since he didn’t know himself he was a Morozov until recently. He sure did want to join the fold, though. If we hadn’t decided to look into his brother, we might have been in the dark as much as you were.”

I sat up, glaring at him, embracing the rage that flooded my system. Yes, so much better than feeling like a stupid pawn, a sheep to the slaughter. All the stories Roman told me about being raised by a single mother must have been true. When he’d found out he had a father, and a powerful one at that, he’d wanted to make him proud at any cost. Even though I was the price, I could relate to his motives.

“You were collateral damage, Karine,” Demian said almost gleefully. I longed to thrust out my foot and kick him. “Feliks sold you down the river to the enemy, letting you marry Roman to keep him close. So we could trick the Morozovs to show up for an ambush and take out all their leaders in one battle. We were going to make sure Roman was one of those casualties, and then you would have been free of him, at least.”

I kept shaking my head as if I could ward off his words, but I believed him now. And I hated him as much as I

hated my father. Did I hate Roman? Just thinking about him gave me a stabbing pain in my chest.

Demian moved closer, leaning down and gripping my chin. “Your father let that traitor stick his dick inside you, Karine. Did you like it? He could have given you to someone loyal, to someone who’s loved you for years, but he let a Morozov take you to bed.”

I jerked out of his grip and wiped the feel of his hand off my jaw. Not even his disgusting words could get through the haze of rage and sorrow that seemed to cover me like a suffocating blanket.

“But why?” I whispered, more to myself than to Roman. “Just because I always followed orders and never caused trouble, did he think I was stupid? Why leave me in the dark? I would have gone along with the ruse just like I went along with the wedding.”

It was true. That was how loyal I was to Papa and our family name. But I wouldn’t have thought I was getting married for life. I wouldn’t have put time and energy into a relationship that meant nothing. I wouldn’t have fallen in love with Roman.

I had to keep it together. I would have rather died than let Demian know how I felt. How I’d fallen for Roman’s lies and given him my heart. I laughed pitifully, not a trace of humor behind the empty sound. Maybe I was as stupid as they all thought.

Demian didn’t notice or care how broken I was and shrugged off my questions. “It wasn’t so much that your father thought you were stupid. You were just more useful being left in the dark.”

Not being trusted was almost worse. I nearly retched at how sick finding out everything I’d known was a lie made me feel. Demian moved closer, sitting beside me on the bed, and my stomach heaved more.

His hand slid up my front to rest on my neck, a light grip but still menacing. He leaned closer, his foul breath blowing into my face. "I'll jump ship for you Karine," he said, his grip tightening around my neck, his lips moving closer to mine. "All you need to do is choose me over him. I don't even care how many times he's used your body. I still want you. You're still beautiful to me. Tell me the word and we can leave this minute. Or, after I'm done showing you how I feel."

His hand began to slide down my neck as he pressed his mouth against mine, trying to force my lips apart with his snakelike tongue. With my free hand I grabbed a handful of his greasy hair and jerked back, then headbutted him as hard as I could between the eyes. My vision blurred to sparkles of light, and pain rocketed to the back of my skull at the impact of his nose.

Blood gushed as he fell backward, his foul hand thankfully off of me at last. I thrashed at the cuff that was chained to the bed, nearly breaking my wrist in an effort to get free. So much pain jolted up my arm that I nearly passed out. But I couldn't. I had to stay awake, because who knew what he'd do to me if I was helpless?

I pulled my legs up and kicked him in the chest, knocking him onto his ass on the ancient linoleum floor. He stood up swearing, trying to stanch the blood from his broken nose. At least I hoped it was broken.

I expected fierce retaliation and tensed to fight until he killed me, because I would have rather died than have him do what he wanted. Instead, he backed toward the door, that smile that frightening smile on his face. It was all the worse now with blood dripping down his chin like he'd just torn a living creature apart with his teeth.

"You might change your mind if you get a little hungrier," he said, reaching behind him for the door handle.

As angry and, heartbroken and scared as I was, my traitorous stomach growled at the mere mention of food. I couldn't remember the last time I ate. Was it before the

explosion? Maybe a few crackers in the hospital? Was Demian really planning to starve me if I didn't give in to his sick demands?

With a laugh, he left the room, slamming the door shut after he was out.

My head fell back, and I kicked futilely at the lumpy mattress. I might just end up starving to death because no one was coming to save me. I was nothing to anyone. My usefulness had run its course. Closing my eyes tight against the tears that threatened to flow, I imagined Roman meeting up with the Morozovs to try to salvage the mission to bring down my father.

Was any of our time together real? Were any of the sweet words he'd spoken the truth?

Chapter 27 - Roman

A day went by that felt like ten. I was surprised I had any hair left on my head from tearing out the short strands from worry and the maddening lack of news. The new hotel I had chosen on the outskirts of Miami should have had a path worn in the carpet from all my restless pacing.

Waiting sucked, and it felt like it was killing me slowly, by inches. Every minute that went without any new information was like a razor cut. I didn't want to sit in this desolate room and stare out over the highway, wondering if anyone in any of the other highrise buildings was as desperate as I was to act. I needed to do something. But what?

I still had no idea where Karine was or if she'd even take kindly to seeing me again if I did.

If she knew the truth by now, and she must, would it be selfish to want to apologize to her? There was no use in explaining because I had gone into our marriage with eyes wide open. I'd reveled in the idea of crushing her heart, gone out of my way to make her fall in love with me.

And in the end, she'd made me fall in love with her, by her simple kindness, her unwavering spirit. I could have come up with a thousand good qualities to describe my wife, and I had been doing just that in the twenty-four hours since she went missing.

I had ignored the last few calls from Oleg, mostly because I didn't know what to say. The mission as we'd set forth was over. I had failed. Perhaps I should have cared more, since all I'd wanted from such a young age was a father to be proud of me. All I could think about was Karine.

She'd somehow broken down every last one of my barriers. From viewing her as no different than her father and wanting to toss her on the pyre of my revenge, to pacing back

and forth in a lonely hotel room with an ache in my chest that only she could heal.

My phone rang from the desk near the window and I jumped for it, all the while steeling myself for disappointment. Evelina had been calling me with updates every hour or so, and they were all the same. No news, no leads, no sightings. Karine had disappeared off the face of the earth.

“I think we have a location,” Evelina said.

I was so prepared for it to be nothing that it took me a second to register the words. “You do?” I asked, my heart hammering double time. So much for not getting my hopes up.

“There’s a house about an hour northwest of the city,” she said. “I think it’s one of their safe houses. Which means she’s with the Drygas, Roman.”

This made my stomach twist, but I still didn’t care who she was with. I needed to know she was all right. That was the minimum. Getting her to speak to me again was more than I could hope for but I still did.

“I’ll tell you where to meet us,” Evelina continued. “We can set up a perimeter and devise a plan. Once we know if she’s really there we can figure out what to do next.” She paused. “If anything.”

I could tell she was still confused about why I wanted to find Karine, more so now that she might be with her family. But she was still helping out and I was grateful. Even if Oleg didn’t want anything to do with me after this, I had made some true friends in my half-siblings.

“Text me the address and I’ll meet you there.”

“Not until you promise you’re going to wait for us. By that I mean, promise you won’t do anything stupid,” she said.

“I won’t,” I lied. I had no time for perimeters or plans. I had acquired a new gun. That was all I needed.

With a sigh, Evelina ended the call. I held my breath, wondering if she’d force my hand to do things their way. But a

few seconds later, the address came through. I grabbed the car keys and my gun and headed out, not bothering to check out of the hotel. Every moment counted and the long drive out through the middle of nowhere seemed to take ages.

It was a nightmare not letting my foot press the gas pedal to the floor, not daring to tempt fate and get pulled over when I was so close. When I got near the address Evelina sent me, my original plan of casing the neighborhood went out the window.

There was no neighborhood, just a loose cluster of old houses on big, poorly maintained lots in the middle of the semi-rural area. I parked the car about half a mile from the house Karine was supposedly in and cut through the big, overgrown yard of the closest neighbor.

I double-checked the map on my phone to make sure I was behind the right place, then stood behind a tall privacy fence, deciding what to do. The house was a squat rectangle, almost like its architectural inspiration had been a trailer. Four tiny windows lined up in a row along the back wall, the dirty beige stucco stained near the bushes that looked like they were hanging on for dear life from lack of watering. It was clear no one lived in the place full time, and I kept watching, looking for any sign of life now to prove that Evelina's intel was correct.

Curtains hung in every window, all of them half open, but not a single person walked past for the ten minutes I stood there, my patience running out. Then I noticed the air conditioning unit in one of the windows was chugging along at high speed. Someone was there. Didn't mean it was Karine, but if the place was vacant, the air wouldn't be running.

Wishing there were more trees to use as cover in the sandy backyard, I found a hole in the privacy fence that I could squeeze through. Staying low, I hustled to the nearest window and peeked in.

A kitchen with dirty dishes piled in the sink and a plate with a few crusts of a sandwich left on the counter. More signs

of life. I moved to the next window and peered over the edge of the pane. Someone was lying on the bed and with a hiss, I ducked back down. My brain processed what I'd seen. Blonde hair, slender arms. The baggy jeans that I'd last seen on Karine.

I raised my head again, gritting my teeth so hard they were in danger of shattering. I had a clear view of her left hand, shackled to the bed. She was twisted to the side to keep her arm from being pulled out of the socket and her eyes were closed. She wasn't moving at all, laying much too still on top of the dingy green sheets. My heart nearly stopped. No. I couldn't be too late.

I stared, unblinking, until I saw her chest rise and fall, then slumped back down below the window. She was here. Alive. And the fact that she was chained up told me in no uncertain terms that she didn't want to be there. That was all I needed to know. Even if she spit in my face, I was going to get her out.

There was a back door that was locked, and I thought I could easily break the hollow wooden panels or even tear the flimsy thing right off its rusty hinges, but I didn't know who else was in there with her. Stealth seemed a smarter plan. With my hand on my gun, the safety off, I kept moving around to the front of the house.

The front door was unlocked, and since there was a welcome mat that said 'Come on in!' I decided to accept the offer. The door didn't make a sound and I padded along the carpeted hallway toward the back. The hallway spilled out into a living room, with another hallway on the other side that must lead to the bedroom Karine was in, just based on how small the house was.

The sound of cheering and music rang out from the living room. When I looked around the corner I saw Demian sprawled out on a couch, watching a football game on an old-fashioned television. He had his leg up on the back of the

couch and shoveled cheese balls into his mouth, completely engrossed in the game.

Keeping in a low crouch, I made my way below the level of the back of the couch and made it to the other hallway without Demian looking up from whatever team he was rooting for. Once I was around the corner, I straightened up and made a beeline for the only closed door at the end of the hall. The sound of the incessant cheers from the other room made me tense, but I was glad for the noise when I turned the door handle and the hinges creaked as I eased it open.

Standing as still as a stone for a second, Demian didn't rush around the corner, so I hurried to close myself in the bedroom with Karine. She didn't move even when I studied the handcuff on her wrist. It looked exactly like what any standard cop would use, so tight it was making her hand a painful shade of beet red. There had to be a key.

I rummaged under the bed, lifted the lamp, and felt around under the stool on one side of her bed. Nothing. I moved to the other side and slid the bedside table drawer out, finally waking her.

I stared at her, feeling a smile take over my face. A series of different emotions crossed hers. A flicker of relief, a shorter flash of happiness, then her eyes went cold and flat, dropping to the gun in my hand. To show her I wasn't there to make her life worse, I set it on the bedside table and rattled the chain attached to her handcuff.

"Do you know where the key is?" I whispered, glancing at the door.

"No," she whispered back.

I dropped into a squat to start taking apart the bed frame. I'd carry her out of here attached to a six-foot-long hunk of metal if I had to. I found a loose screw and began twisting it with my fingertips, all while she remained silent, glaring at me. As hard as I wracked my brain, I couldn't find words that might have made her change her mind about me.

Pulling out one screw and running my hand along the frame for another, I sighed. “I’d give anything to be able to tell you it’s not true,” I whispered. “But I’m done lying to you.”

She didn’t say a word and her dark glare didn’t waver, but I had another screw loose enough to pull it out. A couple more, and I’d be able to take the headboard off the frame and slide the other end of the cuff free.

“Even if you hate me, I’m getting you out of here, Karine,” I told her.

I gripped the headboard and pulled, freeing it from the frame with a grinding clank. I was just about to pull one more bar out of the way and get her loose when Demian sauntered in with his big bowl of cheese balls.

“How hungry are you—” his taunting voice cut off abruptly when he noticed me hard at work, and he scrambled for the gun in his waistband.

I jumped over to where I’d left my own gun, but it was too late. Demian’s pistol was aimed squarely at my head. I held up my hands and moved slowly away from the bed so if he shot me the bullet wouldn’t go astray or ricochet and hit Karine.

“Don’t fucking move,” Demian shouted.

“Okay,” I said, freezing a foot away from the bed.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed Karine was continuing to wriggle the handcuff free from the loose bar. If I could get Demian out of the room, it might give her a chance to get out.

Keeping my hands up, I took a tentative step toward him. “Why don’t we settle this like men,” I said, stopping again when he shook the gun at me. Trying to pretend I was unbothered by staring down that dark barrel was harder than I made it look, but as long as he wasn’t pointing it at her, I was going to deal with it.

“You’re reasonable, right?” I asked. “It kind of seems to me like you might be out of a job by now. I’ve got a pretty successful business. I might be able to offer you one. Why don’t we go to the kitchen and pour ourselves a beer and talk it over?”

Demian laughed at me. “Yeah right. Nice try, but I’m not giving up my woman a second time.” He waved the gun again, taking a step closer. Good, let him get close enough that I could wrap my hands around his scrawny neck. “I don’t care if Karine is used goods now,” he continued. “She was always meant to be mine so you can go—”

Demian’s head exploded in a spray of blood, his body collapsing to the floor only a moment later. I whirled around to see Karine had freed herself and had my gun in her hands. She was as steady as a rock, staring at the fresh corpse on the floor. I was not bothered at all by the blood and brains and bits of skull on the wall.

“I’m my own woman,” she muttered.

My hands were still up in the air and I let them fall to my sides, about to thank her and tell her my car was just up the road, but then she turned the gun on me. There was no denying the look in her eyes. She wanted me dead.

That fact hurt more than the realization that I was certainly about to die.

Chapter 28 - Karine

The second after I got those damn cuffs free from the bedframe, I could see that Demian wasn't having any of Roman's bullshit about giving him a job. It was probably riling him up. I took a second to glance over at him, his ego too bloated to think I was going to be a problem. The more Roman talked, the closer Demian's twitchy finger got to the trigger.

Once I was unchained from the bed, my first objective was to get the hell out. I was completely focused on freedom until I saw the barrel of that gun aimed at Roman's head. I shouldn't have cared. I should have been more than happy to let the two assholes destroy each other.

But every time Demian's finger twitched a little closer to the trigger, the more my objective changed. All I could think about was not letting him kill Roman. Yeah, I probably was the idiot he'd accused me of being, but he'd also pissed me off. And I was starving and fed up.

I grabbed Roman's gun that he'd foolishly left out of his reach while he struggled to take the bed apart. I didn't make a big speech or draw attention to the fact that the upper hand was now mine. I just shot my former best friend in the middle of the forehead. And then watched his body slump to the floor amidst the cheese balls he'd come in to flaunt in my face.

The second he was out of the equation I told myself I was only saving myself, not Roman. I didn't still care about Roman. He was just one more obstacle I had to get past. What I was going to do after that, I had no earthly idea. One thing at a time.

I raised the gun and pointed it at my husband's head and by the time he noticed, his horrified look was almost laughable. After a moment of stunned silence, he spoke up in a choked voice.

“Did he hurt you?”

“Are you going to kill him again if he did?” I asked, both amused and touched.

I had a gun trained on him, one I’d just proven I was very good at using, and he still only wanted to know if I was all right. Shouldn’t he be begging for mercy?

“I guess you know,” he said, his broad shoulders slumping.

He made no move to try to wrest the weapon away from me but I stayed on high alert, sick and tired of being betrayed by the people closest to me.

“I thought you said you were done lying to me,” I reminded him. “Are you going to try to deny you’re a Morozov now?”

“No,” he said, putting his hands back up, all the fight and bravado he’d shown to Demian draining out of him. “I’m not denying it. I’m only telling the truth from now on.”

A wave of dizziness from hunger and thirst hit me and I stumbled back a step, the gun nearly falling out of my grip. It took me a few seconds to steady myself, and I wrapped both hands around the handle to keep it from wavering. It would have been the perfect time for him to lunge forward and get the firearm away from me but he stood in the same spot, looking concerned.

“Damn it, Karine,” he said with a sigh. “I’m going to the kitchen to get you something to eat. Please don’t shoot me in the back when I turn around. Or do. I probably deserve it.”

I watched him do exactly what he told me he was going to, turning slowly and walking out of the room. Still pointing the gun ahead of me, I followed him to the kitchen where he grabbed an apple from the fridge. He opened and shut the cabinets until he found a glass and filled it with water from the sink.

Setting both items on the round, Formica table, he then took several steps back and waved for me to dig in. I grabbed the glass and gulped the water down. It was mildly sulfurous but to my parched throat, it could have been from the deepest, purest spring. Keeping an eye on him and my gun still aimed in his direction, I took a huge bite of the apple. He only leaned against the counter, waiting for me to finish.

“What do you want to do?” he finally asked as I swallowed the last bite.

I closed my eyes against the stab in the heart those words caused. All those honeymoon moments hadn't been real. Beautiful and perfect and all lies. I would have turned the gun on myself rather than let the tears stinging my eyes fall.

“Anything you want, Karine,” he said when I didn't answer.

Why did I still want to melt into his arms after everything he'd done? “I want to get the hell out of Miami,” I said, forcing my voice to be calm and devoid of all the emotions battering my insides. “There's nothing here for me anymore. My father was behind the bomb. Even though Demian went rogue in the end, he was still playing both sides.”

“I'm sorry you had to kill an old friend,” he said. How did he look so much like he meant those words?

I snorted. “That's the last thing you should be apologizing for.”

If it was possible, he looked to be in even more pain than I was. “Do I have a right to try?” he asked. I didn't answer, and kept staring at him, waiting for his mournful mask to slip. It didn't. “My car's parked down the street. You can leave me, stuff me in the trunk. Whatever you want to do. If you let me, I can help you get out of town.”

My foolish heart was screaming at me that Roman wouldn't hurt me, even if he wasn't on my side. It was warring with my brain to forgive him for everything, which would

have made me as stupid as my father believed me to be. But why come here to help me get free when he could have written me off as a lost cause? His mission was over, failed. My father knew everything and had used him as much as he'd used me. There was no going back to our old lives.

And yet he'd still found me and helped me get free from Demian.

Before I could figure out what to say or do, he got distracted by his phone for a second, looking up at me with a rueful smile.

"My half-sister and a dozen others are ready to swarm the place on my order," he said. "Here's what I'm going to do instead." He held up his phone and pressed a few buttons. A moment later a woman's voice came over the speaker and asked him what was going on. She sounded frantic.

"Everything's under control here," he answered. "Go back home." He ended the call and continued to lean against the counter.

"Why would you do that?" I asked, completely stunned. I waved the gun towards his head, precisely where I'd released a bullet into Demian. "Don't you think I'm capable of ending you?"

He smirked toward the bedroom. "I think you're completely capable."

"Then why did you call off your people?"

He shrugged, seeming completely broken by that question. "Because I love you, Karine," he answered in a ragged voice.

I shook my head, feeling hysteria rising that he could keep lying to me, even now. "No," I said. "Don't do that. It's over, don't you get it? My father doesn't give a shit about me. He knows what you've been up to all along. There's no salvaging your plan."

Roman wiped his hand over his face. "I've never been the best guy in the world, but this is the worst I've ever lost my way. I hate what I did to you." He took a step toward me then stopped, nodding in acknowledgment of who still had the gun. "Tell me what I can do to make things right. Anything you ask. Anything at all."

My mind spun in a dozen different directions. Could this be real? Or another ruse, another grand scheme cooked up by the Morozovs? There was one sure way to find out.

"I want to go someplace where nobody knows who we are. Or where we are. No phones, no internet, no contact with anyone."

"Not even my brother?" he asked. "Not even my legit business?"

I shook my head. "That's what I want."

He looked thoughtful, biting his lip. He muttered something about Sergei killing him. "But I could always sell him my shares. We'd have enough..." he murmured, lost in thought. Then he asked out loud, "How long? Are you talking about forever?"

Did he sound hopeful? I had to force my heart to keep from taking over. Words were easy, especially for liars. "We can start with a month," I said.

If someone like him, a big business mogul with a lust for power and control could give up the outside world for a month, maybe he was telling the truth.

"Yes," he said instantly. "I accept the terms."

"What will your father think about it?" I asked. "Sleeping with the enemy so to speak." His eyes widened and a heart fluttering grin began to curl his lips. I held up my hand. "I'm not sure I'm going to sleep with you. Are you still in?"

His blue eyes got a wicked gleam. The good kind of wicked that made my knees weak. "Sure," he said, the smile still dancing around his mouth.

He knew as well as I did that neither one of us could keep our hands off of each other for long, even if we stayed enemies. I hoped we wouldn't stay enemies.

"You didn't answer the question about your father," I reminded him.

The mischievous smile slid away, replaced with a thoughtful frown. "If Oleg Morozov doesn't want me to be happy, then he's not the kind of father I always dreamed about having. If he wants to stay in my life, then he has to make room for you. Because I need you in my life more than I need anything else, Karine."

He slowly reached into his pocket and pulled out a set of keys, tossing them to me. "You can shoot me or take the car and leave me here. Or we could both head to the airport right now."

I grabbed the keys out of the air and looked at him. Really looked at him. Did I actually already know that look in his eyes? Was it really love?

"I love you," he said, as if reading my thoughts. "If you give me a month, or however long you want, you'll end up loving me just as much."

I didn't say I already did. I still didn't believe him. But I wasn't shooting him or leaving him behind, either.

Chapter 29 - Roman

I waited in the kitchen while she found the key to unlock the handcuff, rubbing her raw, chafed wrist when it was off. I didn't want to crowd her or upset her, but packed some of the food that was in the fridge for the drive.

Karine didn't leave the gun, but at least she had tucked it away on the other side of her seat while I drove to the airport. Evelina was meeting us there with our passports, and on the way I called my bank to have a sizable amount ready to transfer to wherever we ended up so we could truly be off the grid for a while.

I should have been terrified. I did feel more laid bare than I ever had before. There was never another time that I'd told a woman I loved her, because I'd never had those feelings before Karine.

Was I really about to leave everything behind? Some part of my brain was screaming at me to regain the upper hand, but in truth, I didn't want it anymore. The thought of giving up everything I'd worked for, the chance to be a part of my new family, facing my brother's wrath—none of it mattered if I got another shot with Karine. A real one this time.

I pulled into the part of the airport where Evelina told us to meet her, and was shocked to see the private jet waiting to take us wherever we wanted to go. I had expected to have to fly commercial, rather than wait around for the plane my brother and I used to arrive from California.

"You don't even have to file a flight plan," Evelina explained. "Or, at least not a real one. A perk of being a Morozov." She turned to Karine, who'd tucked the gun away in her waistband, and smiled, introducing herself.

Karine nodded stiffly, opening her mouth, then closing it again, not sure what to say. Not sure where her loyalties lay

yet.

“I’m not your enemy,” Evelina told her. “Just a sister who wants her big brother to be happy. If that’s with you, I’ll always have your back no matter what your last name is.”

Karine’s lip trembled and hitched into a tired smile. I had to turn away to hide my emotion. Seemed like being part of a big family could be messy, but so worth it.

“Getting our father on our side won’t be as easy,” Evelina warned me before I could get too comfortable.

Karine’s head dipped down and I wanted to put my arm around her in a show of solidarity, but I was still all too aware of the gun tucked under her shirt, and the fact that she was exhausted and traumatized. I only told Evelina it was a chance I was willing to take.

More than willing.

While we waited for Ivan’s plane to be ready for takeoff and for Karine to decide our first destination, I stepped away to call Sergei.

“You’re not going to believe what’s going on,” I said, telling him if he was still in the office, he might want to close his door.

“So you think I’m about to start shouting?” he asked.

I laughed. “You just might.”

I laid it all out on the line. The plan was a bust and I had been outed as a Morozov. Karine was devastated and thought about killing me for at least a few minutes. If I stayed in Miami I was a dead man walking, or we’d have to engage in outright war to eliminate the threat.

“There’s more,” I said, after he was done swearing and taking it all in.

“Oh God,” he groaned. “What?”

“I’m in love with Karine. I fell in love with my damn fake wife.” For some reason that got him laughing. “Glad you

find it hilarious,” I grumbled.

I could almost see him shaking his head as the laughter died down. “Serves you right. I don’t get how this is going to work out? You said you’re at the airport with her now? You can’t mean to come back to LA, can you? I don’t know how long I could keep you both hidden.”

I appreciated that he was at least open to taking us in. “I don’t know where we’re heading. And I can’t tell you when we get there, either.”

I explained Karine’s deal to him, assuring my twin that I had wholeheartedly accepted the terms. When I offered to let him buy me out, the shouting finally started.

“Are you kidding me? Hell no. We started this business together and I’m not letting you out so easily. Take an extended vacation instead.”

“You’re being remarkably cool,” I said, getting choked up.

“I am remarkably cool,” he said. “We can talk about it again in a month. Or longer. Take however long you need. We’ll always be brothers.”

When I couldn’t answer, he asked if I was crying, which made me laugh. “I just really want this to work out.”

Sergei sighed. “I don’t get how you can be so willing to give up your whole life. But I get it a little bit more than the urge to destroy everything in your path. I honestly wish you two the best of luck.”

We ended the call and I put my head in my hands, overcome with gratitude and hope. I felt a soft hand on my shoulder and looked up to see Karine staring at me with an unreadable look on her face.

“Are you having second thoughts?”

“Not even a little,” I told her. “You?”

She shook her head, her eyes softening and her hand still resting on my shoulder. “Not even one. I think this is the first choice I’ve made for myself in my entire life.”

I frowned, wanting to pull her into a hug and assure her she’d be able to make plenty more choices from now on. I wanted to give her whatever she wanted. Sergei was wrong about me giving up my whole life. Karine was my life. There was nothing left without her.

“We’re ready over here,” Evelina hollered, waving from the steps of the jet.

I hugged her, telling her I’d speak to her in a month, or maybe not. Either way, I was glad we were family. She held on for just a second too long, then shoved me toward the steps. Karine was already at the top and she waved tentatively to Evelina, her smile a little more relaxed.

Once we were inside and the door was shut, the flight attendant told us she’d make an announcement when it was time to buckle up, then shut herself into the front cabin. Karine stood with her hands clasped, eyes bright, and I couldn’t hold back anymore.

I moved to her side and pressed her against the bulkhead so our bodies were close together. “Can I kiss you?”

She smirked, keeping her hands at her sides. “You know I still have the gun, right?”

There was the first stirring of playfulness in her voice and a smile tugged at the corners of her lips.

“I think I’ll risk it,” I told her, leaning close.

Our lips were millimeters apart and I paused, waiting. Her hands came up to my chest and her fingers curled into my shirt, pulling me that last bit closer. Our lips touched and it was the same fire that always ignited between us. Her mouth parted and I slid my tongue between them to meet hers. The feel of her hands running up my chest and linking behind my neck to pull me even closer as she sighed was like coming home.

Any last bit of trepidation over not knowing where in the hell we'd end up fell away. It didn't matter. Karine was my home.

The speaker over our heads clicked on and the flight attendant told us we were about to start. We swayed as the jet lumbered forward.

"Time to buckle up," I said, leading her to our seats.

"You could probably still make a break for it," she teased.

I yanked her close, wrapping both my arms around her. "Not for anything. Now are you going to tell me where we're going?"

She pulled back and grinned. "Not on your life. You have to wait and see."

I settled back as the wheels below us ate up the tarmac and we lifted off. "As long as we're together," I told her. "As long as you're happy."

Chapter 30 - Karine

One month later

Somewhere in Mexico

I adored the little seaside village we settled in after taking a few weeks just to travel up and down the coast to find the perfect spot. This place felt like home, with friendly locals, lots of fresh seafood, and a view of the Pacific over the roofs of the cluster of quaint, tiny houses in our neighborhood.

We weren't exactly roughing it, because Roman had taken out a massive amount of cash when we first arrived, right before we rented a rowboat so he could chuck his cellphone into the ocean. I had told him just taking out the SIM card before tossing it in any trash can was fine, but he wanted to make a grand gesture.

He got us a bottle of wine and a basket of fresh fruit and we lazed around on the little boat for an hour, enjoying the sunshine and breezes, before he stood up and flung it overboard. There wasn't a trace of regret on his face as he watched it sink below the waves, then he turned and kissed me.

We had been taking long walks along the shore and through the narrow lanes of our adopted village, enjoying long lunches, and took up oil painting in the evenings when the light was perfect on our balcony. His were surprisingly good, while my attempt at recreating Van Gogh's sunflowers looked more like I'd splattered macaroni and cheese on the canvas.

There wasn't a dull moment, and if Roman was thinking about his business he left behind for me or missing anything about his old life, he wasn't showing it. We kept nothing from each other, talking late into every night, but we didn't make any plans for the future, either. We were making

every day count and the last month had been the best time of my life.

I held out a whopping three days before falling into bed with him, and he'd spent those three days patiently driving me crazy with long, slow kisses and his expert touch. When I realized I was only punishing myself by holding out, we couldn't keep our hands off each other. He told me he loved me every day and now I believed it without any more reservations. He'd even mentioned extending our time away from the world and I could tell he meant that too.

I really was enough for him.

I still hadn't told him I loved him back yet and I wasn't sure why I was still guarding that last bit of my heart. I had given everything else to him. As much as I knew we'd find a way to be happy if we stayed sequestered together forever, I wanted to see if we could make it in the real world.

I was going to bring it up that night after our usual dinner of fish that we grilled together on our balcony, and set aside my plate, ready to spill my heart to him. Music started from down the street and he grinned, jumping up to pull me into his arms.

We danced close together in the small space, and soon I was distracted by the feel of his hands roaming up and down my back. I tipped back my head and instead of kissing me, Roman dipped me low, then twirled me into the house where he pressed me against the wall.

"I need you so much," he said, kissing me ravenously.

"Yes, eight hours is much too long," I teased, getting just as fevered by the kisses he trailed down my neck.

I ran my hands through his hair, which he'd let grow out from his meticulously short cut, and his curls bounced under my fingertips. He'd been swimming in the ocean before dinner and smelled and tasted of salt. I licked him behind the ear, making goosebumps rise on his arms.

“Oh, you’re going to pay for that,” he said, stepping back to lift my top over my head. Dipping his head to kiss my breasts as soon as it was off, he murmured how much he loved me and how beautiful I was as his mouth traveled lower.

I leaned back against the wall and closed my eyes, enjoying his travels down my body. He didn’t bother to pull my loose, flowy skirt off, just shoved it out of the way to nuzzle me between my thighs. I gripped his shoulders, letting him take me away.

“I love it when you don’t wear panties,” he said, sliding his tongue across my sensitive flesh.

I laughed, then gasped. Pretty soon I yelped, clapping my hand over my mouth so I wouldn’t shake the roof with my ecstasy. That was one thing about having close neighbors—we tried not to be too noisy. Didn’t always succeed, but we tried.

Roman made his way back up, jerking down his jeans before pinning my limp body against the wall and pulling my legs around his waist. His cock bobbed between us, slapping against the wadded up fabric of my skirt. This would be fast and furious, then later tonight in bed...

I gasped when he rammed deep inside of me and clung to his shoulders. He leaned back to search my face, not so lost in his passion that he didn’t want that connection with me. He nodded once and I nodded back.

“Karine,” he moaned.

“Come for me,” I urged, another orgasm building as he struggled to hold back. “I—”

Before I could tell him the words I’d been building up to, he roared and thrust hard, tossing me over the edge. I cried out and melted against him, only held up by his big body and the wall.

“Roman,” I whispered over the sounds of his rough breathing. He knew he was everything to me, but why couldn’t I tell him?

He grabbed me around the waist and carried me to our bed, where we fell in a tangle of clothes and limbs. We were silent as the evening set in outside our window and the room grew darker. I didn't want to fall asleep without telling him and I rolled to my side to face him, stroking his stubbled cheek.

"I'm completely happy," he said, his eyes drifting shut.

"I—"

There was a crash outside our bedroom and he jumped up, instantly alert. Someone was either in our house or about to be. Tugging his pants up, he tossed me one of his shirts which I tugged over my head. I swore, bringing his eyes to me.

"The gun is in the living room," I hissed. We had grown a bit soft after being away from Bratva life.

"It's probably someone trying to steal the TV," he said. "Get on the balcony and I'll take care of it."

He nudged me toward the sliding door and turned to face our intruder. "No way," I said, not about to let him go out there unarmed.

He scowled, just as our bedroom door flew open and my father burst in, waving a gun. Roman's eyes filled with terror as he shoved me out the balcony door. Over the side I could see someone stalking back and forth on the street below, clearly staking out our place.

"Get inside, Karine," my father called, and since he had a gun, I complied. I wanted to wipe that smug smile off his face but could only clench my fists at my sides as I glared at him. "It took me all this time to find you, so congratulations on hiding your tracks for once," he said.

I wanted to say something scathing but instead of pointing the gun at me, it was aimed at Roman and my heart seized. Why did I hold back before? Was my husband about to die without ever hearing me tell him I loved him?

“Just let it go, Papa,” I pleaded. “You don’t need me anymore. We’re no threat to you.”

“On the contrary,” he said, neither his eyes nor the gun wavering from Roman. “Do you think I’ve given up on Miami? I found a new family to team up with me for the right price.” Now he turned to me with a leer and my skin crawled. It seemed I was once again for sale. “I still have money and sway,” he continued. “The Morozovs didn’t completely destroy me.”

“Dryga,” Roman growled. “If you think you’re taking her out of here...”

My father ignored him, his eyes cutting to me for the first time. “I can shoot Roman through the head and he’ll die easy. Or you can put up a fight and I’ll shoot him in a couple of agonizing places so he bleeds out nice and slow. Either way, you’re coming home with me, daughter.”

I didn’t know what to do. I spent the last month trying to deprogram myself and find my worth without it having to be tied to my father’s approval. He was just a stranger to me now, and an evil one at that. I found I had the strength to be able to tell him to fuck off, but before I could open my mouth, Roman lunged for him.

“There’s no way you’re getting your hands on her ever again,” he growled, taking my father down and slamming the hand holding the gun into the floor.

It fired, the shot going wild and sending chunks of the ceiling raining down on us. There was a commotion going on outside but I didn’t dare take my eyes off the fight in front of me, trying to find an opening to help without getting either of us shot in the process. I jumped out of their way as Roman smashed his fist into my father’s face and another bullet whizzed past me to shatter the glass door.

“Run, Karine,” Roman shouted, getting his hand around my father’s wrist to repeatedly bash it into the floor. He still wouldn’t drop the gun and I picked up a heavy vase to

try and crack him on the head if only they'd stop rolling around.

“Go,” Roman pleaded, but I wouldn't leave him.

With his gun raised, another man burst through the door, sweeping it back and forth.

I dropped the vase. It was over. At least I got one beautiful month with the man I loved.

Chapter 31 - Roman

I kept wrestling with Feliks, not about to let him spoil the pure happiness I had with Karine. Shots went wild and my heart raced, thinking she would be killed, but my brave girl refused to leave my side.

I lost my grip on Feliks's throat and thought I was about to feel a bullet tear through me, but then someone else burst in waving a gun. I cursed, thinking he was about to shoot Karine, fighting even harder. Both our lives depended on me getting the gun from Feliks so I could end this once and for all.

"Stop," a familiar voice shouted. "I've got it under control."

Keeping a grip on Feliks, I looked up to see the gun the other guy was holding wasn't aimed at Karine, but pressed against Feliks's temple. Knowing he was bested, Feliks relaxed his grip on his own gun. I grabbed it and scrambled to my feet.

I was shocked to see my half-brother Leo, and hurriedly told Karine who he was. Stunned, she sank onto the bed and pressed her hand against her chest.

"Did the Morozovs just save us?"

Leo grinned. "You're damn right, we did. Now go wait in the living room."

She stood but faltered when she looked down at her father with the gun still pressed against his head and my foot on his chest.

"We're just trussing him up for easy transport," Leo told her, saying in an undertone to me, "For now."

She nodded and scurried toward the door. We pulled her father to a standing position and just as she was about to leave the room, he went berserk, throwing his weight at Leo and knocking him to the ground. Then he lunged at her,

smashing her into the doorframe. When I heard her cry of pain, my vision went red. As his fist raised to strike Karine, I whirled him away from her by the back of his neck. He turned to me with a snarl on his face. A face full of hatred. The face of a man who'd kill his own daughter because he didn't get his way.

Without thinking, I raised the gun to his chest and fired.

The sound rang out, seeming louder than the wild shots during our tussle. A red stain bloomed over his heart and he dropped to the floor.

I couldn't believe I actually killed someone. And Karine's father, of all people. I looked at her, about to babble an apology, but she threw herself into my arms. Leo took the gun from my hand and left the room, saying he'd get whoever was left from Feliks's crew out of the area.

"We shouldn't stay long," he warned. "As much as we don't like US police attention, we really don't want the Mexican police on our asses."

I could tell Karine was in shock as she continued to silently hold onto me. I might have been, too. But I gathered up some of our things and got us out of there, sorry to have to say goodbye to our little home like that. Right before we followed Leo out the door, I left behind a wad of money for the landlord to cover the damage. He'd been a good guy letting us rent without any references and if he couldn't get the blood stains out of the carpet, I left him enough to replace it.

Leo led us to his SUV parked on the next block and the only thing I knew was we were heading north. I kept my arms tight around Karine in the back seat, trying to find the right words to say to express my regret. I could only manage to tell her I loved her, hoping it was enough for now.

"I love you, too," she whispered to my surprise, then repeated it more forcefully.

I couldn't believe how good it felt to hear her finally say it even though I knew. Her actions had shown it, but I could have listened to her say it a thousand times more.

I opened my mouth to tell her how sorry I was, but she reached up and pressed her finger against my mouth. "Stop feeling guilty. He had to go."

"Karine," I said. "I still—"

"No," she interrupted. "I'll always choose you, just like you chose me."

I pulled her close and she rested her head on my shoulder. There would probably be a deeper conversation about this in the future, but for now my heart was at ease with my wife safe in my arms.

Leo turned around from the front seat. "Are you two ready to get back in the game?" His grin was wide and expectant, and even the driver had a knowing smirk. Crazy Bratva, always raring for a fight.

I looked to Karine for the answer. "Whatever you want to do."

Her smile took over her pretty face. "Hell, yeah. More than ready."

And so was I. For whatever came next.

Epilogue - Karine

One week later

Miami

I was stunned at how welcoming the Morozovs were to me when we returned to Miami. Evelina offered to help me plan another wedding if I wanted, and Roman seemed all for it. I told them I'd think about it, not wanting to disappoint them, but I was never that concerned about the wedding aspect of being married. I just wanted to end up with someone I loved who loved me back. And I got that, so no need for another ceremony.

We were back at Roman's beachside apartment while we decided if we wanted to build our dream home from scratch or move into a house close to our new family. 'So the kids can play together,' Evelina and Roman's cousins' wives all teased me. When Roman overheard them, he got a hungry look on his face, which excited me.

He was going to be sooo happy.

But first we had a lot of cleaning up to do. As the new head of the Dryga organization, I'd been spending a lot of time sorting out who would remain loyal to me and who needed to be sent packing—or worse.

Roman slid right back into his investment firm business as if he hadn't been gone for a month. He was brilliant at it and having all those rich contacts didn't hurt either family. Well, one family now. Or, at least I hoped.

Oleg Morozov was due to arrive in town today and so far things had been frosty over the phone between Roman and his father. It was the same with Sergei, who was thrilled to have him back in the business, but still didn't want anything to do with the Bratva. I'd been able to poke my head in a few

times when Roman was on a video chat with him and he was always nice to me.

We'd graduated to cracking jokes the last time they were on a call. I popped up to say hello, Roman pretended he had to use the restroom so we'd be forced to speak to one another alone. I could tell Sergei wanted to like me, and I had a lot of hope for a relationship with my brother-in-law, especially since I almost had him pinned down to promising us a visit.

I set out the little sandwiches I made, along with the iced tea and cookies from the Russian bakery, a blatant attempt to win Oleg through his stomach. As I stood in the living room, staring at the careful arrangement I had set up on the big coffee table, Roman came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist.

"Stop staring daggers at the flower arrangement," he teased. "Everything will be fine."

"But what if it's not?" I wanted everything to be perfect, once again needing to prove myself.

Roman turned me in his arms and gave me a reassuring kiss, silently telling me I was perfect just how I was. "Then we'll pick a new spot to go off the grid."

He was grinning but I knew he was serious. He really would have given it all up again in a heartbeat if I was unhappy. But I wanted everyone else to be as happy as I was and was determined to make our combined families work.

The doorbell rang, and I jumped. Roman laughed and went to open it, letting in his four giant, strapping cousins, Eveline and Leo, and finally Oleg. No spouses or children would be present this time since it was more of a business meeting than a family get-together. We were all going to have dinner at Ivan's tomorrow night, that is if everything went smoothly today.

Our apartment was big, but all those huge Morozov men seemed to dwarf it with their great size and powerful

auras, as they crowded into the living room and found places to sit. Tiny little Evelina would have looked out of place, but she had the same stubborn, self-assured air about her that made her seem half a foot taller than she was.

I was the only Dryga in the room, but I could handle it. I knew all of the cousins by now, but so far we had always been together in a more casual setting, surrounded by their wives and kids. This was all business, and the stern look on Oleg's face made my palms sweaty.

“Shall we get started?” Oleg asked after we made small talk and nibbled on the sandwiches for a few minutes. His voice was surprisingly quiet, but everyone fell silent at once. “Explain to me why we should incorporate with the Drygas, Karine.”

All eyes turned to me and Roman moved his knee almost imperceptibly so that it touched mine, not wanting to take my hand and possibly make it look like I needed moral support.

I outlined the steps to assure my people would stay loyal. “I've already had to dispatch about a quarter of them,” I said, the meaning clear to everyone in the room. “The ones who are left, I can confidently vouch for. They're hard workers with ambition and drive, and most importantly, families they want to keep safe. They recognize their best option is to join forces.” I turned and beamed at Roman, reaching to squeeze his arm. “My people are important to me, and so is my organization, but first and foremost, I'm Roman's wife. He'll always be my first priority.”

Oleg nodded, seeming pleased. The smile faded as he turned to Roman. “And where do your loyalties lie, Roman?” he asked. “Do you want to be a Morozov?”

Roman looked down, twining his fingers with mine. I squeezed his hand hard, knowing how badly he wanted this, even though he would have given it all up for me in a heartbeat. Clearing his throat, he looked Oleg squarely in the eye.

“My last name is Anishin, a name I’m proud of because it was my mother’s and she worked hard to give me everything. My wife is a Dryga, but her name doesn’t matter. Whatever her name, I’ll always be loyal to her.” He paused to smile at me before looking back to his father. “But I’m also a Morozov by blood and I want to earn the name by my actions. Just like with Karine, I don’t care what your last name is. I just want to get to know you as my father and make you proud.”

Everyone’s jaw dropped as the old man’s eyes glistened with tears. My throat was sore from holding them back at Roman’s beautiful speech. Oleg leaned over and clapped him on the shoulder.

“I’m already proud of you, son. You’ve made the right choices so far, and I can’t wait to see what else you can do. Now we just need to get your brother over here!”

“Working on it,” Roman promised. “Now how about we break out the vodka?”

Everyone seemed on board with that idea, and Roman stood up to go to the liquor cabinet.

“Uh, I have one more thing I need to say,” I said, my face burning when all those intense eyes were on me. I glanced at Roman. “I was going to tell you later when we were alone—”

“No fucking way,” he murmured, sitting back down and grabbing my hand. “Tell me, Karine.”

I swallowed hard, my face feeling like it was on fire. “Tell us,” Evelina urged. I could see that she’d already guessed, just like Roman had.

“I’m going to have a baby,” I said, giggling when everyone whooped and broke out into applause. Oh my goodness, it was so wonderful to have a big family.

Roman wrapped me in a hug, dragging me almost onto his lap as he rained kisses all over my face. “I can’t believe it,” he said, for my ears only. Oleg had stood up, brought the vodka over, and poured shots for everyone.

“Are you happy?” I asked, unable to stop smiling at his clear, unfettered joy at the news.

“Happier than I’ve ever been,” he told me.

Oleg passed the tiny glasses of spirits around, with one filled with iced tea for me, and we toasted simply to the future. Ivan then announced that they all needed to leave us alone to celebrate our good news, and I gave him a grateful smile.

We walked them to the door and when they were all done hugging us and saying their goodbyes, Roman picked me up and carried me back to the couch. We collapsed onto it and put our feet on the coffee table, not bothering with the leftovers.

He put his arm around me and I snuggled up against his chest. “So it looks like we’re running an organization and starting a family,” he said with a note of wonder in his voice.

“Can you handle it?” I asked, looking up at him to see nothing but love in his eyes.

He leaned down to give me a soul stirring kiss. “As long as you’re by my side, I can handle anything.”

THE END

About the Author

Lexi Asher gave up a promising career in the medical field to focus entirely on her family—and her writing. She lives in the beautiful, luscious Virginia countryside with her husband, 3 young children and 4 pets.

The Ashers' rustic cottage is bustling with activity all day long, so when Lexi wants to get her head down and let her creative juices flow, she will often take refuge in their beautifully ornate conservatory where Lexi does most of her writing.

When it comes to love, Lexi is a big believer in second chances—sometimes you just meet the right person at the wrong time. So, her stories often feature old flames that are reignited and broken hearts that are mended. But is love really better the second time around? Well, read and find out!

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[**Surrogate for the Bratva**](#)

[**Bullied by the Bratva**](#)

Betrayed by the Mafia

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“Small Town Billionaires” Series

[**Pretend for the Billionaire**](#)

[**The Billionaire’s Baby**](#)

[**The Billionaire’s Next Door Neighbor**](#)

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“The Crenshaw Billionaire Brothers” Series

Billionaire Brothers is where grumpiness and pain give way to romance and love. These loaded heirs may seem to have it all: money to burn, looks to die for, women to spoil. But it takes a special someone, a magical spark to reveal the real man behind the facade.

[Grumpy Billionaire](#)

[Bossy Billionaire](#)

[Daddy Billionaire](#)

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“Lakeside Love” Series

Riverroad is a small town where everyone knows everyone, where the guy you’ve known since childhood turns into the hottest hunk around, where friends become lovers, and where everyday interactions between neighbors might just turn into steamy encounters when you least expect it...

[Chasing A Second Chance](#)

[Chasing The Doctor Next Door](#)

[Chasing A Fake Wedding](#)

[Chasing The Cowboy](#)