



BRATVA  
*Queen*

MISTY WINTERS

# BRATVA QUEEN

A MAFIA BROTHERS ROMANCE SERIES

# MISTY WINTERS



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Also by Misty Winters

About the Author

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# PROLOGUE

## ISABEL



“**M**om, why did you leave them?”

Maxim watched me carefully, still dressed in his wedding suit, though with the collar completely loosened. It was only myself and my four sons sitting at the kitchen table of Dmitry’s house, long after the wedding guests had left and my daughters-in-law had gone upstairs to bed.

My youngest son was asking me why I had left my first three sons behind in Moscow to start a new life in Saint Petersburg—when they thought I’d died. He was born thereafter; he’d never even known about them until he sought them out in the past year. I looked down at my hands, wringing them together in nervous thought.

*How much should I tell them?*

They’d resented me for years. With the intel I had, I knew that they thought I was dead—of course, so did Stepan—but once he was gone and the Koslov boys grew up, they heard of my presence. They knew I was alive, and they knew that I was doing everything I could to not be found by them. Of course they would resent me for that.

It was high time they found out why I had to do what I did.

It was a long story. One that had many twists and turns, elations and heartbreaks. Though, more of the latter, if I had to be honest. To really help them understand the perils I’d been through in my life, I would need to start at the beginning.

With a final sigh, I looked up at him, then met the eyes of Misha, Dmitry, and Ivan, as well. “It’s quite the story. Boys, listen up, and I’ll tell you everything.”

## CHAPTER 1



# ISABEL



**I** let my fingers travel down my thighs as I dropped down low with my back against the pole. My feet ached in my incessantly high heels and my ribs pained from the tight corset bra that squeezed the life out of me but made my breasts pop just the way the guys liked it. None of that, however, plagued my mind when he was staring at me like that.

*His dark eyes held this intensity, this raw passion and fire that felt so dangerous. Yet, my gaze locked onto his every time, seeking out that exhilaration. I couldn't look away. I danced for him. I longed for him.*

*I craved him.*

WHEN I WAS A CHILD, MY MOTHER TOLD ME I WOULD ONE DAY MEET A MAN I'd fall in love with. We'd get married, have children, and live a life of happiness. She told me I'd find someone who would treat me like a princess.

What she didn't tell me was that a princess is trapped—bound by duty to remain in the castle, waiting for the handsome prince to come and save her. So, I decided long ago that I didn't want to be a princess...

*I wanted to be a queen.*

The joke was on me, though. Even a queen is trapped when there's a king with his greedy fingers around her neck.

For the longest time, I stopped believing in the fairy-tale ending my mother had promised me years before. There was only one thing—one person—that kept that magic alive, even when it was at its dimmest.

*He made me believe.*

When you're poor in Belarus, everything is hard. You wake up knowing you're broke. Your stomach aches for a decent steak, but you're left with cheap canned meat on stale bread. But worse is the smell...

The smell of poverty is enough to make anyone strive for wealth; the smell of sweat pouring down the faces of the hardworking laborers, alcohol washing down the sorrows and regret from having to live in the repetitive cycle of being trapped in poverty. And believe me, those smells were abundant in the building I grew up in.

My papa was a cruel drunk. A real son of a bitch. My mama worked her ass off to provide what she could, both in and out of the home. But no matter how many hours she worked, her job couldn't pay the bills. Still, she would drag her tired limbs through the front door after work to cook whatever measly meal she could whip up in our tiny kitchen for Papa, my young brother Oleg, and me.

Meanwhile, my father would empty bottle after bottle of vodka, demanding that he worked harder because he made more money in the factories. And because he "worked harder," he deserved to walk into a clean home and have dinner waiting on the table, hot and ready for him to eat before he got wasted. "Never drink on an empty stomach," he'd tell me. The only decent piece of fatherly advice I ever got from him.

For years, I'd dreamed of going to college after graduation so I could get away from that hellhole and make a living for myself. No way would I follow the same path as my mother. I refused to spend all day exhausting myself at work, only to come home to an abusive asshole and have to work even more.

Did my mother *ever* relax? Or was she always trapped in that relentless cycle of work and poverty?

Unfortunately, when I graduated high school, I couldn't afford to go to college. I got a part-time job as a waitress, but it didn't bring in much money. And what money I did bring in went to my parents, to help pay for the bills.

So, a year after graduation, I found myself stuck in the same pattern as my mother. I was in the same apartment, living the same life I'd be doomed to live forever. Or so it felt.

Taking a long sip of my water—which was much cheaper than any other drink on the menu—I sat on the hard, cracked seats of the vinyl booth. Inessa, my friend from the apartment building, sat across from me and dug into her stack of pancakes with butter and syrup dripping over the edge of the plate.

Glancing down, I stared at the unappetizing dried-up toast and *varenye* waiting for me.

Eyeing my food, Inessa raised her eyebrows and leaned in. “What is that pathetic meal?” She plopped a pancake onto my plate.

“Don’t judge,” I said, attempting to slide the pancake back, but she insisted otherwise. “It’s all I can afford right now.”

“Which is why I keep saying that you should come and work with me,” she said, scooping a big bite into her mouth. “You’ve definitely got the body for it, *kukla*. Those hips? *Yebat’!*” Fuck! Her voice sang the cuss word out, and she set the back of her hand to her forehead as though she would faint.

I laughed, glancing around the dingy diner. “Yeah, right. You know I’m not interested in... *that* line of work.”

Inessa rolled her eyes. “You can say it, you know. It’s not a forbidden concept. *Exotic dancer.*”

“Well, it’s not for me,” I answered, giving in and cutting into the deliciously sweet and syrupy pancakes.

“It’s good money.” She had a smirk pulled at the corner of her red-lined lips. Pulling out a stack of cash, she waved it around for me to see, just low enough not to attract the attention of other, less fortunate patrons in the establishment. “This is from one week of work. Even after paying my rent and electricity, I’ll have more than enough left over.”

My eyes followed the money as she tucked it back into her bag. Shaking my head, I pulled away my gaze. “That’s a lot of money, but I don’t think I could be a dancer, Essa.”

That night after work, I came home to see my mother sitting at the kitchen table, her back heaving as she sobbed into her arms.

“Mama?” My voice was quiet and concerned, my thoughts instantly going to my father. Jerking my head around, I didn’t see him. “What happened, Mama? Did Papa hurt you?”

She shook her head, pulling her face from her arms. Her cheeks were puffy and red, stained with streaks of tears.

“He left us.”

That was all she said in a tiny, broken voice.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

She bit her trembling lip and clutched a small vase on the table housing a wilted flower she’d picked last week. “I mean he’s gone!” she shouted, throwing the vase against the wall. The glass shattered, scattering across the

floor. “He ran off with a *shlyukha!*” A whore.

My heart ached for her, though a piece of me was relieved to know my papa was gone. Past the relief was a much harsher reality. How would we afford rent without his money? Once that realization sank in, I slumped into the chair next to her.

“That’s not all,” she said, as if reading my thoughts. “Turns out, he hasn’t paid rent for the last three months and he cleared the savings account before he left.”

My eyes quickly lifted. “Does that mean...”

“We don’t have any money, and we’re facing eviction.”

She buried her face in her hands, crying into her palms. Her voice trembled as she croaked out, “What are we going to do?” She sobbed, choking on her spit. “The *svoloch*’ didn’t say a damn word about the unpaid rent! If we don’t find a way to pay up, we’ll be out on the street. How can we ever come up with three months’ worth of rent in time? We can barely afford one month!”

I knew that Inessa had the answer to my problems, and I would need to swallow my pride for the sake of my family. To keep the three of us from becoming homeless. To keep my brother in school. To keep us alive.

Miraculously, I didn’t even need to interview to get a job at the club. All I needed was one look from Boris, the club manager, with his black eyes traveling down along the contours of my body, to land the job. I had the pure white skin of a Russian woman, still young and untainted by hard work and harsh climates. Along with my deep brown eyes and black, silky hair that flowed down to my waist, it was a contrasting, but pleasing image, I could admit.

“You start tomorrow. Bring your own makeup. The girls will find you something to wear.”

Before my first shift, I spoke with our landlord one-on-one about paying the rent. I explained the situation regarding my father, hoping he’d pity us enough to cut us some slack. He didn’t pity us but gave us the chance to pay everything—three months’ back rent and one month’s current—on the next due date. And if we couldn’t, we were out.

I had one month to get four months’ worth of rent. How in the hell was that supposed to happen? Needless to say, there was a tremendous amount of pressure weighing me down on my first night at the club. And because my mind was troubled, I messed up... *a lot*. I was too shy, too nervous. My

moves were jerky and had no flow.

Boris had me on the stage in the quietest corner of the club to start out. I was relieved I wouldn't yet need to give a lap dance like the other girls were doing out on the floor, but that didn't settle my nerves much. My ankles wobbled in the tall heels I borrowed from Inessa, and my thighs burned from the constant squats and stretches. I wasn't really able to lift myself onto the pole yet, not expertly anyway. When I got home in the early hours of the morning, I had to hold my palms under a stream of cold water in the kitchen sink to calm the bright red friction burns.

"I understand," Boris said after that first shift. "I've seen a lot of newbies and nearly every one of them is terrified on their first night. But you need to get over that fear if you want to work here. The clients expect a certain type of woman, and if you can't be that, then you won't make it in this business."

I spent half of the next day practicing in my room in front of the mirror, twisting and rolling my hips, finding my inner seductress. Of course, I was a virgin, and it showed. I needed to become more sensual and move slower, with more strength in my muscles so there would be no more wobbling or shaking in my limbs. It would take a while, but I was determined.

Mama wasn't thrilled about this career direction, but what choice did we have? I could've tried out for a scholarship—which was what she wanted me to do—but then *she* would be left with the rent and the bills. Not to mention, taking care of my brother. Though he was near graduating from school and planned to join the Russian military when he was done, he still had a few months left before then.

The following night, I did a little better. I still wasn't nearly as good of a dancer as the other women, but I was a lot better than my previous night, reciting the mental notes I'd made to loosen my hips and let them sway. A fumbling mess—yes. But I was improving, which was enough to please Boris.

A week later, as I prepped for my performance—adding a bit of body glitter to my skin, pulling my boobs up to sit seductively in their black sequined cups—a few of the girls giggled and pointed from behind the curtain of the dressing room.

"That's them," one of the girls whispered.

Cocking my head to the side, I stood from my chair to see what all the fuss was about. "Who?"

"The bratva."

I rolled my eyes, not believing that any man out there was in the bratva. Why the hell would a bratva man come here? They were supposed to be the richest, most extravagant and want-for-nothing kind of men. We were downtown, where there were strip clubs and children's daycares in the same building. Of all the exotic clubs, wouldn't one of the flashier ones in the city better suit their tastes?

"Which one's the leader?" one of the girls asked—rather loudly—as she pushed her way to the front of the small group.

Another answered, "The sexy blond in the center."

I glanced out from behind the curtain to see this "sexy blond" guy. Yeah, he was attractive, with bright blue eyes and soft wispy hair falling to the side of his forehead.

But very quickly, my eyes fell on the man beside him. A dark-haired man, standing with his hands folded in front of him and his chin held high. He was a thick man, with wide shoulders, bulky arms, and thighs that filled the black jeans he wore. With his strong jaw and jutting Adam's apple, the ultra-masculine way he held his head up made my heart flutter. Even his hair was goddamn sexy, ruffled with not a care as to which direction it lay.

The entire group of men was watching us ladies eyeing them, but I felt his eyes burn into me, specifically. We locked gazes, and I saw his eyes darken. They narrowed slightly, and the muscle in his jaw popped. The blond leader must have said something because he broke his deathly stare to glance at him, then turned away to order a round of drinks without looking back.

My eyes followed him for a moment, then fell back onto the blond guy, who I quickly realized was watching me. While the other girls turned back into the room to finish their prepping, I saw him cast me a devilish smirk and raise his glass, enticing me to come to his table.

That night, luckily, I was on the pole anyway. The blond bratva man watched me all night, situated right in front of me with his legs wide and his eyes never straying from my slowly moving body. Instead of reaching out to touch me, he slid money onto the stage at my feet and watched me pick it up smoothly, either dropping down or bending over, with my ass held high. He didn't hold back, the money I got from him that night was more than I'd gotten on any other night.

And that was just the start of it.

ANOTHER WEEK PASSED, AND I WAS REALLY STARTING TO GET THE HANG OF the job. Even if I didn't feel turned on or particularly sexy, I'd learned how to act as though I did. I learned how to smolder my eyes, lower my voice, and move slowly—no matter what I was doing—walking, dancing, talking. Everything had to be slow and seductive.

The more effort I put into that, the more tips I received. Boris had officially asked me to start giving lap dances on the floor, and my income increased substantially.

When I got to the club one night, I was backstage prepping with the girls when Boris strutted into the room, brushing his way past topless women toward me. "Isabel, you have a customer requesting you for a dance."

I groaned slightly, turning to face him. "Oh, please tell me it's not Mr. Octopus again... He's so grabby." I pouted and the other girls giggled, knowing exactly what I meant.

"Wha—who? No, it's Mr. Koslov."

I heard gasps around me and turned to see my colleagues looking at me with excited eyes. "Mr. who?" I asked.

Boris didn't have much patience for our feminine chit-chats. "Just hurry up and get out there. He's asking for you and he doesn't like to be kept waiting."

When he led me to the table, I saw a familiar face and realized why the girls were so intrigued. It was the blond bratva guy. The apparent leader of one of the biggest crime organizations in Russia, the man who'd been watching me dance on stage every night for the past week.

He didn't look so dangerous, sitting there with a casual smirk. I noticed for the first time—being off of the bright stage and under the dim lights of the club floor—that he had a single earring in his left ear. His hair flopped to the side as though he'd recently run his fingers through it, and his eyes... they were the lightest of blues. Like crystals.

Scattered about the club were three more familiar faces; his bodyguards dressed in all black. They'd been there every night as well, watching Mr. Koslov and everyone else in the club with lethal stares. I immediately looked toward the dark-haired man and saw him eyeing me critically. I couldn't tell if he hated me or didn't trust me or what the hell was going through his mind. All I knew was that he wasn't the big boss; he wasn't the one paying me hefty tips every night, so I had to break that stare and pass right by him, heading straight for the sexy blond guy instead.

The warnings my mama had given me flitted through my mind for a second, but the money he usually slid my way took precedence. So, I sauntered up close, smiled seductively, and leaned in.

“What can I do for you, stranger?”



## CHAPTER 2

# ALEKSEI



As soon as she appeared from behind that red velvet curtain, her eyes found their way to me. As the right-hand man to Mr. Stepan Koslov, it was my job to vet every person that came near him. At least, that was what I told myself as my eyes dragged down her silky, lily-white body.

We were visiting from Moscow, Russia, only in Belarus for new business ventures. Stepan was born and raised in the Koslov Estate in Moscow but owned a large townhouse in Belarus, as well. However, this downtown strip club, a good hour's drive from that townhouse, was apparently one of the only clubs not owned by certain rivals of ours, so here we were, "enjoying" ourselves.

Stepan was insistent on waiting for this dancer to come out to the pole every night, and tonight he'd requested her individual attention in the form of a lap dance. I didn't blame him. I couldn't deny that I'd been watching her too. Though it wasn't my tendency to visit these kinds of clubs, I couldn't help the intrigue that claimed me when she stepped out onto the stage and swirled around that pole.

She was unforgettable. A wonder of a woman with long, dark hair that made her pure skin seem even whiter. Her body was like a goddamn dream—slim at the waist, but with ample breasts and wide hips. Every time her chocolate eyes locked onto mine, I wondered what she was thinking. I wondered what the fuck she was doing here. If anything, with those looks she could be on the cover of magazines, not strip teasing for greasy old *podonok*'s. Scumbags.

Despite my interest, I was forced to wait on the sidelines as Stepan tried to woo her. That was my job: always listen, always watch. Stepan bought me

lap dances from other dancers, believing it would please me and keep me entertained, but how could I focus on a lap dance when I was on duty? When it was my job to keep an eye on him, and therefore, the woman he was so insistent on meeting? Perhaps I was just fooling myself. The other two guards seemed to have a fantastic time standing in the back, watching the other girls and chatting them up with stupid grins on their faces.

My attention was solely on her when she made her way past me, her shoulder only inches from my chest, and her eyes breaking contact with mine at the very last second. She moseyed over to Stepan with a sexy strut. Tonight she wore a deep purple bra with fluffy tufts at the edges and black high-waisted shorts that honestly, could be considered underwear with the way it tugged up between her rounded ass cheeks.

“What can I do for you, stranger?” Her voice was low, seductive. I ground my teeth together, flexing my jaw. Was that really who she was? Was she the kind of girl that allowed herself to be a plaything for dangerous men like Stepan? I knew from just one look into her eyes that she was so much more intelligent than that fake voice she was putting on.

Stepan lifted a hand, curling his finger in my direction. I stepped up to his side and glared at her. She had her hand on his shoulder and her knee resting beside his leg on the wide seat, with his fingers sliding up her smooth thigh. I couldn't help the animosity that grew inside of me when I saw her submitting herself to him. Her dark eyes flitted to mine for only a second, before she cast them back down to him.

“Aleksei, make yourself scarce. In fact... Boris! Find my friend a worthy girl to take a seat in his lap, will you?”

The club manager nodded and clicked his fingers toward another dancer, who smiled pleasantly when she looked my way. Obedient as I was to Stepan, I took a seat—not too far away—and allowed the dancer to make her living between my legs.

“Oh, someone's happy to get a dance,” she said, glancing down at the hardening lump in my pants. I huffed out a laugh, though it was forced. She didn't need to know that it was the sight of Stepan's girl rolling her body against his chest that had me unwillingly excited. My dancer put her ass in my lap and began grinding against me closer than I thought she would. Maybe she was aiming for a bigger tip. “Tell me what you like, big boy,” she purred.

“Shh, I'm trying to listen,” I said, my hand on her ass cheek to keep her to

one side, my head tipped in the opposite direction.

She didn't like me shushing her, but I had a job to do—to keep track of my boss and everyone he was conversing with, of course. When she leaned forward against my shoulders and swayed her hips, obstructing my view, I placed my hands on her hips to stop her. She stopped with a sigh and raised her eyebrow expectantly. It was clear that I wasn't exactly watching her. So, I flicked a couple notes her way, and she left to find someone who would actually pay her attention.

“Got a name?” Stepan asked the seductress, leaning back in his chair with leisure. It was a game to him. Like a visit back to childhood, when the kid on the playground with the most toys was favored. He shared his toys but coveted the best for himself.

“You can call me whatever you like,” she answered in that same fabricated voice of seduction. Though, her tone was a bit shorter when she added, “For the right price.”

“Oh?” His lip curled in amusement, pleased with her answer. “Whatever that price is, I'm certain I have more than enough to satisfy you.”

She turned away so her back was facing him and positioned herself on his lap. Her ass rocked against him slowly, and his eyes nearly rolled back in his head. From where I sat, I noticed her eyes roll as well, only in the opposite sense. She was indeed faking it. It amused me, and if I hadn't noticed that little break of character, I'd have assumed she genuinely lusted over him too.

Clearly, she was also playing a game, though hers held a different intent. One in which she was very good at performing her job and drawing the cash out of him. Stepan sat with a satisfied expression, feeling victorious over her apparent attraction. I bit back a laugh.

He continued asking her questions. After some back and forth, she finally gave her name. *Isabel*. Though he was persistent to learn more about her, she continued to give short answers, revealing almost nothing about herself.

*Surprise, surprise. A woman at a strip club doesn't want to give her personal information to an interested customer. Could he blame her? Who knew what creeps lurked around these clubs, especially in this particular part of the city.*

Stepan continued to come back every night. He charmed his way in, speaking with her and learning more about her. And every night, he would ask her out, only to be turned down. But he didn't give up. He was enamored, completely captivated and fascinated by her.

Stepan's approach to getting to know her was far different than mine would be. I often wondered what questions I would have asked her if I was the one receiving her attention. Perhaps something a little more personal, something along the lines of, "Who are you when you walk out of this place? Who were you before you started working here? What dreams did you give up to be here?"

But I couldn't. Stepan was interested, so I was expected to back off and let them be. I wouldn't dare intrude. Doing so would be a death sentence.

STEPAN WAS CAUGHT UP IN THIS NEW BRATVA BUSINESS ONE NIGHT WHEN I came on duty.

"Alek, I need you to go to the club and keep the other men away from Isabel. I won't be there tonight, but I can't let those other *ublyudki* touch her," he said with disgust in his voice. He was meeting with a new associate, and of course, couldn't put the meeting off for a lap dance.

When I arrived at the club, I spotted Isabel almost immediately, being waved over by some hefty man with a beer gut flashing her a stack of yellow Ruble notes. Her shoulders slumped slightly as she walked over to him with a forced smile, tousling her hair.

I quickly took her in as she walked in long strides. Tonight she wore even less clothing than before, making this so much harder for me. Her bra was a simple black lace, and her thong sat high on her hips, bowing down below her belly button and rounding out her ass so fucking perfectly. As if to create some air of mystery, she wore a sheer black gown with little sparkles of glitter in the material, hanging lazily off of one shoulder.

*Christ*, it was as though she'd dressed for me tonight; not too fancy, more relaxed and informal, as though she was in her own bedroom.

I stepped in front of her, cutting off her pathway to the guy. When she recognized not only my face but that I was intercepting her next customer, she seemed to sigh with relief.

The guy stood up and shouted, "Hey!" as he waved his money around. "I had her first!"

*Had her.* As if she were a toy and he wanted the first turn. I glanced over at him and whipped out a stack of whatever cash was in my pocket—not

yellow 100s, but blue 2,000s. “Let’s let her decide who to go with, *hm?*”

Isabel’s full lips turned up at the corner. “Sorry, Vlad. Money talks.” She turned on her five-inch heels and escorted me to an empty table, gesturing to the plush booth seating. “Well, are you gonna sit?” she asked, in that low tone of hers.

I pulled out a chair for her to sit in front of me. She eyed it skeptically, reluctant to take a seat. “Your feet must be sore from those heels,” I said, motioning to the chair.

“They are.” She sat down, eyeing me carefully and slipped them off, rubbing her feet for a moment as she asked, “So, where’s your boss? I’m surprised he isn’t here badgering me with questions.” Her voice was bland, not piqued like other women who have asked about him before.

“He got held up,” I answered, sitting down on the booth seat. “I’m surprised you’re not more interested. Most women are thrilled to have Stepan’s attention.”

She scoffed, rolling her eyes with that same attitude I’d spotted the first night Stepan met her. “So long as he keeps paying, I’m thrilled.”

I swallowed deeply, shocked by the overwhelming sense of jealousy that was creeping down my arms and into my fists. Her feelings should’ve come as no surprise. Any woman would prefer the boss over the right-hand man. Like a cold awakening, it made me think straight again, and I decided to dig into those feelings, on Stepan’s behalf, of course.

“May I ask, do you like Stepan? Are you... fond of him?”

She laughed, “*Fond* of him?” Her eyes captured mine. “Are you asking if I want to fuck him?”

“That wasn’t my question,” I said. “I was curious if you were interested in him romantically.”

Her head cocked to the side, and she stared at me, her emotions undecipherable. I noticed the color of her eyes was not just chocolate but had some gold within them. She also didn’t wear much more than a touch of makeup, with dark red lipstick that contrasted her skin. After a minute, she answered, “He isn’t so bad. Could be worse, like Mr. Pot Belly over there.” She gestured with her thumb. “But I don’t really know him. He’s been coming in every night, talking to me and asking me questions, like some kind of reporter.” She chuckled, her laugh smooth like velvet.

I couldn’t help but laugh back. “He’s just a man interested in a woman.”

She watched me, as if trying to read my thoughts. What did she see when

she stared at me? Perhaps I was nothing more than Stepan's wingman to her. But maybe, just maybe, she was just as fascinated by me as I was with her.

"All the men here are like that," she answered gently with a shrug, pretending not to care, though I could tell that she cared a bit more than she let on. "They only want one thing."

"Do they?" I asked, quirking an eyebrow.

"Yes."

"I don't."

"Oh, please," she said with a huff. "I'll bet you don't even know my name. I'm just another *suchka* you want to fuck." She leaned back in the chair with her eyes narrowed at me, her leg hanging over the other, and her arms crossed under her breasts.

I watched her for a moment, deepening my gaze into her eyes. "Isabel." The name flowed out of me easily and smoothly. Just for a moment, I'd thrown a kink in her tough exterior. "What's my name?" I asked, deciding to be bold.

"Aleksi," she said, her gaze just as intense. I realized that her voice no longer held that low, seductive tone, but rather a more genuine hum. She was being real with me. She was allowing me to see that intelligent, spirited side of her that Stepan had never been able to draw out of her.

It was more than I'd ever hoped for.

I looked down and licked my lips, leaning forward with my elbows on my knees and my hands clasped together. "I knew you were more than just a pretty face."

When I looked up again, I saw a look on her face that held something I didn't recognize. I forgot for a moment we were in the middle of a strip club. Suddenly, the dim lighting and alcohol-infused setting pushed its way back in, bringing me back to reality when a gruff voice interrupted us from behind me, shattering the hazy glow of our first conversation.

"You're on the clock, Isabel." I turned to see Boris, the short, portly manager with hair poking out of the top of his shirt standing beside us. "This isn't fucking social hour. You want to date, do it on your own time. If you're going to talk, you need to dance while you do it."

Isabel looked down, biting back her hostility in the same way she had with so many other men in the club. If I hadn't observed her so thoroughly in the recent past, I wouldn't have noticed the irritation. Still, she gritted her teeth and said, "Sorry, boss."

He nodded and walked away.

She strapped her heels back onto her feet and stood. “So, what’s it going to be?” All the genuineness from before had been stripped away along with her dignity. “Lap dance?”

I sat back, holding up my hands. “Uh, no... You don’t have to—”

“You heard him,” she murmured. “I need to dance when I’m on the clock.” Her eyes remained locked on mine as she began to sway her hips from side to side, perfectly aligned with the music pumping through the club. I shifted uncomfortably, looking over my shoulder, though I knew neither Stepan nor any other bratva men were here tonight. It was just me, and her.

I felt a tap against my ankle and wrenched my head back to see her toes nudging my legs open wider. I obliged and she stepped between them, turned around, and bent over. Her delicious, soft ass wiggled right in my face. I didn’t know how to react. Not because of the lap dance—that I was somewhat used to—but because it was her, the gorgeous woman I’d come to respect and desire more than any other before. I had no idea where the boundaries were. Could I touch her? Stepan would definitely have my balls. But what about her? It was clear to me that she was flattered by his advances, but what about mine?

I decided to value my life instead and spread out my arms across the booth behind me, gripping the backrest hard enough to turn my knuckles white. Isabel stood up and peered over her shoulder at me, then lowered her ass into my lap with her hands on my knees.

My hands quickly flew to her hips and lifted her slightly. “It probably isn’t a good idea for you to dance for me, let alone sit in my lap.” *Let alone feel my cock rising for you.*

“If I’m not dancing for you, I’m dancing for someone else.” She stood up and turned around, setting her hands on my shoulders as she placed her knees on either side of my thighs and lowered herself down, straddling me. “And if I’m being honest, I’d much rather dance for you than some cheapskate *svoloch*’.”

“Oh, so this is about the money then?” I couldn’t help but ask, gesturing to her in my lap and realizing too late that I was flirting.

Her responding smile was sultry, flashing her white teeth that had a sexy little gap in the front. “If Stepan asks, that’s the reason.”

If Stepan even saw this, he’d have me disemboweled and would string my intestines from the ceiling like streamers, let alone *ask* me why she was



dancing for me.

Letting that comment hang in the air, her eyes said it all. At least that was how it seemed to me when they fixed onto mine for much longer than was necessary. She leaned back, arching her back as she displayed her fucking fantastic, perfectly spherical tits for me. Her sheer robe was merely a scrap of material, hanging from her elbows, leaving her body exposed. I stared in awe at her magnificent figure, mesmerized by the beauty of her curves and the flawless softness of her skin. I felt my heart pounding in my chest as I marveled at her stunning beauty and my desire for her increased with each passing moment.

“And if I ask you?” My voice was breathy, I was getting too lost in the dance to think about what I was saying. “Why you would choose to dance for me?”

She pushed herself back up, and with her hands dragging over her sides, rolled her hips in my lap. I felt like losing my shit and touching her, everywhere. With all the willpower I could muster, I managed to keep my hands to myself, gripping the sides of the booth tightly. However, the opposite was true for my eyes. They feasted on her as much as they possibly could.

When she pressed forward again, lifting her chest to nearly swipe my nose between her thick breasts, she finally answered, “I have a feeling that you wouldn’t dare ask, Aleksei.”

I kept quiet, tightening my jaw. She was right. It wasn’t my place to flirt with her, to ask her anything about her intentions toward me. Once again, my hopes were doused in ice-cold water as she reminded me that Stepan was my boss, and she was essentially his toy to play with, not mine.

“Why *are* you here?” she asked eventually, letting her hands stray from my shoulders to tease the hair at the back of my neck, sending delicious chills down my spine. “Without Stepan? Did you want to speak with me alone? Without him taking my attention away?”

If I wasn’t set on being realistic and professional about this, I would swear that she looked hopeful.

“I’m here because he can’t be here.” She frowned slightly at me, cocking her head to show her confusion, so I continued explaining in my straightforward, professional voice. “I’m here to make sure no one else touches you.”

“Oh... and that includes you?” She narrowed her eyes and lifted the side

of her lips playfully. “Because you know... you *can* touch me.” Her voice had almost softened at the end, as though her suggestion was more intimate and real than anything else she’d said tonight. Her slight fingers even slid down my arms, over the swells of my biceps to settle gently on my hands, ready to guide them to wherever she needed them to be.

“No... I assure you... I cannot,” I ground out.

She took her hands off mine. Was that a look of disappointment? A pout? I’d be so lucky. She stood up again and turned around to continue dancing between my legs, rolling her hips and bending down low, only to pop her ass back up in front of me again.

With an inaudible sigh, I pulled out the stack of cash I offered earlier, and tucked it into her thong, at her hip. She glanced back with a smile, thanking me, but I could see that all sense of genuine flirtation was gone. I was pure business to her again.

I felt a sense of responsibility wash over me. Isabel was not mine to want. I was a *bratva* man; I had obligations, even if they were toward a man I did not truly respect. Because of that, beyond my attraction to Isabel was shame; the shame of wanting her anyway, of fantasizing about having her to myself.

Stepan trusted me to keep other men away from her. Little did he know, it was me he had to worry about.

## CHAPTER 3

# ISABEL



“Here, that’s all I have.” I handed Mr. Gusev a stack of money to pay the back rent that was owed.

“This is only three months’ worth,” he said, flipping through the bills and tossing them back into the envelope before shoving it in his desk. He made the extra measure to lock the drawer, as if I’d steal it back from him.

“I know,” I answered, looking away. “I can get the rest of the rent caught up if I can have just another week or two...”

He huffed out a long, deep breath. His eyes scanned over my body and his eyebrow lifted. “Maybe we can have a little transaction of our own,” he said, lids growing heavy with an anticipation I’d grown to recognize. “You know, something to solidify the deal. Something along the lines of your new profession.”

“You want a dance?” I asked, flat out. He nodded slowly in response. “Why now? You didn’t ask for this kind of ‘transaction,’” I quoted with my fingers, “last month.”

He shrugged, unfazed by my disgust. “You weren’t dancing last month.”

That was probably the first time I realized my mother’s concerns were valid. Mr. Gusev had always treated me like a young woman and was respectful and, for the most part, nice. But as soon as word spread through the building that I was a dancer, he transformed into a disgusting pig.

What else could I do? If a mere dance was what it took to avoid my family being evicted, then I’d have to do it. It would chip away at my dignity, but at least I wasn’t prostituting myself, right?

I told him to wait while I readied myself in his bedroom. I closed the curtains, shook out my hair, then removed my T-shirt. Underneath, I had on a pink sports bra that showed enough cleavage to satisfy him. I slipped off my jeans, leaving my tights pulled up to my waist with my black panties visible through the sheer material.

When I called him in, his eyes bugged out of his head and dragged slowly down my body. I roughly pushed him down onto the armchair in the corner of the room—at least the resentment I felt toward him worked in that aspect. As soon as I leaned in close, touching his shoulders, he smiled. His rotten teeth became visible, and his resulting bad breath wafted my way.

I closed my eyes and turned around, trying not to gag—disgusted with him or myself, I didn't even want to think about it. "No touching," I said sternly, then swayed my hips slowly, desperately trying to take my time. I told myself to imagine someone else, and quickly Aleksei came to mind. I felt his eyes watching me, dark and dangerous, forbidden and pained, as though the world would end if he allowed himself to touch me.

I dropped my ass down and popped back up, hearing my landlord's grunts of delight. I turned my head and saw his hand on his bulging crotch. "When I say no touching, I mean no touching *at all*."

He smiled coyly and lifted his hands, showing me his obedience but still licking his lips hungrily. I continued the dance for five minutes, imagining slow, sensual music. I then ended with a quick swipe of my butt cheek against my landlord's knee, just to make sure I did all I possibly could and told him to disappear into his bathroom to "appease" himself. He gladly did so, and by the time he was done, I was dressed and long gone.

I didn't tell my mama the details of how I got the extension, but she was thrilled to know that we had another month to get caught up.

"The money is so good, Mama," I said, making myself and her a cup of coffee. "I'm tempted to just stay a dancer. Forget school." Though I was mostly teasing with a cheeky wink, a part of me was serious. I was enjoying the job. The money. Seeing Aleksei every night. And Stepan, sure. He was nice; he paid me a lot of money, but Aleksei was the one I felt *excited* to see. Knowing his eyes were on me, I danced for him, touched myself for him. I could pretend my hands were his traveling the length of my body.

Mama tsked, shaking her head slowly. "You won't be young and beautiful forever," she reminded me. "You need a backup, and that's where college comes in. You can dance for now to save up money for college, but

don't get sucked into the lifestyle. Steer clear of the men in those places. They're shady and up to no good. Dirty men. *Ublyudki!*" Bastards.

"Alright, Mama..."

*But the man doesn't take no for an answer.*

Every night, Stepan waited for me to start my shift. And every night, he asked me out. To dinner, coffee, to the ballet—it didn't matter. He was persistent.

In a way, his insistence was charming. To know that someone was so interested in me... it felt good. I felt *wanted*. A part of me was certainly turned off by the fact that he wouldn't listen when I said no, but I did have to admit, I liked the attention. I liked the way his eyes grew hazy when he looked at me, with more adoration than the other perverts in the club who just gawked at me. He asked questions about *me*, and although I didn't like giving away personal information about my life to anyone in the club, I liked that he wanted to know more about me—to know me deeper than just on a sexual level.

I, of course, didn't mind too much that Aleksei was constantly watching me as well. Maybe it was because I just couldn't help my attraction to him, but I liked his presence. He watched me with an intensity that sent tingles through my body, in a different way than Stepan did.

But, every time my eyes lifted over Stepan's shoulder and caught Aleksei watching, I had to remind myself that he didn't actually want me. He made it clear that night he refused to touch me even though Stepan was nowhere to be seen. I recognized the gentleman in him, but it still stung a little that he was so against it. That he could resist so easily.

My attention was better spent on a man who really, truly, wanted me—Stepan. His gentle touches and smooth caresses while I danced for him assured me that he was interested, that I had his full attention.

ONE AFTERNOON, I TURNED MY KEY TO UNLOCK THE FRONT DOOR, AND WHEN I cracked it open, I heard a heavy sob. Shoving the door all the way open, I rushed inside to see my mother in a heaving pile on the floor.

"Mama?" I ran to her side, crouching down beside her. "What happened?" Just like the night my father left, she was a mess.

Tears hit the stained carpet as she choked on her words, barely capable of speaking. “It was him... That man...”

I pushed the hair back from her face, tucking it behind her ear. “Who?”

“Stepan... Koslov.”

My heart sank and I froze in place. What did I get my mother into? What kind of bratva bullshit did Stepan pull? “What?” I asked, my tone hardened. “What did he do?”

“He... He bought the apartment.”

My head cocked to the side. “He what?” Now I was confused. Why was she crying? What the fuck did that mean, *he bought the apartment?*

“He bought the apartment!” She gazed up at me, cheeks puffy and red. “The landlord called me and said that Stepan Koslov now owns the building and that we didn’t have to pay rent at all anymore!”

My mouth gaped open, unable to form words. *Did he... He bought the whole fucking building?*

*Why?*

I was beyond stunned. Why would he do something so extravagant for some dancer in a club? Did he really like me that much? Was it a business thing?

I was both impressed and terrified.

“Isn’t this great, Isa?” my mother asked. When she swiped away her tears, I finally realized they were tears of complete, all-consuming relief. “No more struggling for the rent. You could even cut back on your shifts at the club. Maybe you’ll even have time to start school next year.”

I couldn’t lie, relief washed through me at the thought as well. But how could I ever repay him for such kindness? Listening to my mother list all the ways our life would be better, I pushed aside my concerns, allowing myself to dream of the possibilities with her.

But I had to face the facts. By doing something so incredibly nice, I couldn’t possibly say no to his advances anymore. *I owed him.* What kind of a person wouldn’t go out with the man who’d just waived her rent for eternity?

I tried to explain my concerns about Stepan and his odd persistence to Mama, but she waved them off. “Oh, nonsense,” she said.

“But you’re the one who warned me against men at the club. They’re all dirty, remember? *Ublyudki?*”

She shook her head with a dazed smile. “How bad could the man be if he

paid off our apartment? He must really like you. If I were you, I'd snatch him up now, before another woman does."

I shook my head, struggling to take it all in. Such a grand gesture had my head spinning. "But if he really likes me, then wouldn't he turn away other women?"

My mother let out a loud laugh. "*Meelaya*, you need to live in the real world and understand that it isn't all sunshine and rainbows. Just because he likes you, doesn't mean he'll wait around forever. He's young and has his life ahead of him."

Still, I didn't understand what she was saying. In my mind, if you loved someone, you would wait forever for them. But what did I know? I'd never been outside of the city, outside of my life here. I didn't know a thing about the real world, aside from bills and work.

"Think of it like this," she said. "He could have bought you flowers. Instead, he buys you an apartment. How much does one man need to give before you'll give him a chance?"

I nodded slowly in agreement. I mean, it was true—Stepan had already done more for me than any other man had. Hell, he'd done more for me before our first date than my father had done for my mother in 20 years of marriage. Maybe she was right. If I'd met Stepan anywhere else, I would've jumped at the chance to go out with him.

*Yes. She's right. Tonight at work, I'll tell him yes.*

But when I got to the club, he wasn't there. Nor was he there the next evening, or the next. Several days later, I still hadn't seen him.

He paid for my rent and then apparently, disappeared.

ABOUT A WEEK HAD PASSED AND I BEGAN TO FEEL A LITTLE... NEGLECTED. I knew nothing was official, but Stepan had practically saved my ass from eviction; didn't that mean something?

When I arrived home after my shift, it was early morning and my mother had just left to get to her own job on time. It was weird to not see her that often anymore, but on this particular night, I felt relieved to have some privacy. I was exhausted, I couldn't hold up any kind of conversation, let alone my mama asking about Stepan, again. Every time I told her that he had



once again not shown up, she became annoyed. With me. As though I'd done something wrong.

I dropped into bed and quickly fell into a deep sleep.

I awoke to a rough hand sliding up my thigh. With my energy completely drained, my eyes refused to open and I just smiled, humming lightly in approval. My body squirmed slowly, arching, moving closer to the presence of this enticing feeling.

His hand traveled higher up and tickled my waist. I giggled. A knee bowed the bed between my thighs as he leaned over me with his heavy body. I felt a warm breath brush over my cheek, and I turned toward the sensation, lifting myself, drawing closer to the sweet scent.

I kissed him.

His lips were so full and so hot, gentle but pressing forward with an urgency I matched equally. My hands lifted and I touched his cheeks, feeling the rough stubble, pulling him down to me. His thigh between my legs lowered with the weight of his body and pressed down against my center.

“Ah!” I moaned, having never experienced the hard body of a man pressing against me *there*. Sure, men touched me at the club, but never in my most intimate place. Never like this. And I never had this kind of reaction either—a desperate, burning need to push back and feel more. *So much more*.

“Stepan...?” I asked tentatively, my eyes slowly fluttering open.

“No, Isabel,” a familiar, deep voice said. “It’s me.” The blurriness of sleep cleared, and I saw him. Aleksei. Staring down at me so hungrily with that same dangerous, forbidden, almost angry glare he always had whenever he looked at me. A heat bloomed within me, and I was surprised at the sudden elation I felt to know it was him touching me. Actually *wanting* to touch me.

I kissed him again, sliding my hands around his neck and pulling him down. His thigh pushed my legs apart, and I felt him lower his body down onto mine. My mouth opened slowly, his tongue slid softly inside and twirled my own in a dance of sensation. My knees pulled up and my feet touched the backs of his thighs, skimming down to his calves.

“Hmmm... Isabel...” he groaned into my mouth.

I dragged my teeth gently over his bottom lip, pulling at him. “Aleksei... I want you,” I moaned, needily. My voice sounded whiny, like a spoiled girl begging for what she wanted but couldn’t have.

I bucked my body up and he pushed his down. That prominent, hard

bulge I felt that night as I danced for him pressed against my heated pussy, and I cried out.

The noise awoke me suddenly.

It was a dream. I was breathing hard with need and realized that I had my leg wrapped around a pillow, pushing against it desperately.

*No... no! It shouldn't be him! It can't be him!*

It was just a dream, but the metaphorical value was too bright to deny. No matter what Stepan did for me or how sweet he was to me, my body wanted the man who didn't want me.

## CHAPTER 4

# ALEKSEI



I couldn't believe Stepan bought Isabel's apartment building.

They'd be able to live there forever. Even though her brother had recently joined the military, he'd have a home to come back to, without worry or fear of eviction. That is, as long as Stepan wanted them to. Now that he owned the building, he could do what he liked with it—charge the tenants whatever amount of rent he liked or, as in this case, charge them nothing at all. What would happen if he decided not to pursue her anymore? Would he make them leave? Charge a ridiculous rent?

What bothered me the most was the way he went about it. He made sure the landlord knew to tell her that Stepan Koslov did it. "Write it down," he'd said, peering over the guy's shoulder to make sure he spelled his name right.

Sure, Stepan was trying hard to win her over, but if he really cared about her, would it matter if she knew it was from him? Wouldn't seeing her happier and more relaxed, knowing she didn't have the struggle of rent looming over her head, be enough?

Stepan wasn't like that.

He liked to boast his power and wealth. He wanted everyone to know he was important—including her. Stepan operated in a world where people owing him was second nature, and he always ensured he came out ahead on deals.

That didn't sit well with me because Isabel wasn't some business deal—she was a person. Whether Stepan intended it that way, I had no idea. Maybe I was too kind, too *humane* for the *bratva*. Not that it was ever intended for me... I didn't exactly have a choice.

A day after buying the building, some shit with that new associate—

Dima, I believed his name was—went down, and Stepan was shot in the shoulder. He spent a few days in the hospital, one where the docs knew to keep their mouths shut. When he was released, he had to rest at home, which meant he couldn't make it to the club to see Isabel.

“Go to the club and check on her,” he said, pouring us both a shot of bourbon with his good arm—and the other in a sling—as we sat in the private den that formed part of his bedroom suite. “Let her know I was injured and that I will return after my recovery.”

“Well then, I'm off,” I said, standing from the chair to head to the club, hoping he wouldn't recognize the eagerness in me. No matter how much it bothered me to see her and know that I couldn't have her, I would never turn down the opportunity.

“Make sure you give her a ride home,” Stepan called out, downing a third shot. “I don't want her walking home in that area.”

I nodded and headed to the club, waiting outside for Isabel rather than going in. I didn't feel right going in there alone anymore. If I went in, I'd either have to watch her slide her body against some slimy asshole, or she'd have to dance for me, and the temptation was just too much. I couldn't trust myself to sit there and not touch her, not *want* her.

Parked behind the building near the staff exit, I waited in my car, listening to my *Nautilus Pompillious* cassette. It must've been two hours before I saw her walk outside with a few other girls after their shift, heading toward the side road that connected to the club. The sky was already lighting up, though the sunrise was still at least an hour away.

I stepped out of the car and leaned against the hood, tilting my head back as I called out, “Isabel!”

Her head cocked to the side, her glossy hair flapping with the motion, and she squinted. “Aleksei? Is that you?” Her hands were stuffed in the pockets of her jacket, above the high waist of her tight jeans. I sucked in a cold breath between my clenched teeth. *Those curves will be the death of me.*

I nodded. “Yes. It's me. Stepan sent me to give you a ride home.”

She walked up to me, looking a little nervous, maybe? Her eyes met mine for only a second, twinkling in the neon light of the club sign before she looked away and asked, “Oh, he did? And where is Stepan? I haven't seen him in a while.”

“He's injured. He wanted you to know that he would be back once he's recovered enough.” I tipped my head, trying to catch her gaze again, trying to

gauge why she seemed so avoidant. At my reply, she quickly looked at me.

“Is he okay?” She straightened, her face filled with concern. “Was it serious?”

Still leaning back against the hood of my car, my hands were deep in my own pockets—whether to keep them warm or keep them from reaching for her waist, I wasn’t going to analyze. She stood close to me, the low lighting forcing her to step toward me as she spoke, trying to see my face more clearly.

“He’s fine,” I said in a low tone, feeling a clenching in my stomach. I hated that she was so concerned for him. I hated that she cared at all. But who was I to feel anything about her? To me, she was merely an extremely good-looking woman. That was all she could be to me. Nothing more.

Breathing out a huff of relief, she nodded. “That’s good. So, what happened?”

“Bratva business.” As soon as I said the words, I wanted to take them back. Surely, Stepan had told her about being in the bratva. Of course, everyone knew without being told, but whether he officially said anything to Isabel, I wasn’t sure. And my big mouth so openly said it.

She nodded, her expression indecipherable.

“Come,” I said, gesturing to my car. “Get in.”

Hesitant, she followed me to the passenger door. Maybe the mention of bratva had spooked her. I opened the door, closing it after she climbed in. When I turned the car on, the music blasted out, loud enough to make us both jump. I turned down the volume.

“Sorry about that,” I muttered, taking out the cassette and turning it to the radio.

She chuckled, resting a hand on my arm and clutching her chest with the other hand. “That scared the hell out of me,” she said, smiling. “But at least you have good taste.”

I cocked an eyebrow, peaking at her hand on my arm from the corner of my eye as I started the car. “Really? Stepan teases me for listening to them.”

She took her hand from my arm and squeezed both between her thighs for warmth. My heart beat faster, just from the thought of those delicate fingers touching those inner thighs. Did they ever travel higher? When she was alone? I was dying to know. Who would she think of?

“Obviously, Stepan doesn’t have good taste in music,” she said with a cheeky smile. It was perhaps the first time she’d said something against him,

and I couldn't help the slow smile that grew at the corner of my mouth.

I pulled away from the club, heading in the direction of her apartment building. I'd followed Stepan's car to drop her off more than once and knew the way well. As I drove, I was very much aware of the quick, awkward glances she sent in my direction. I noticed her licking her lips, rubbing her hands together, squeezing her thighs closer. Was it just me, or was she just as curious as I was about this... tension between us?

After a few minutes, she said, "Stepan bought my apartment. Did you know that?"

My lips pressed together. "I did."

"Of course you did. I figured as much. I haven't spoken to him since I found out. Could you tell him I said thank you, since I'm unable to?"

I couldn't figure out if she was pleased about it or uncomfortable. Her tone shifted mid-sentence, making her hard to read, but I was sure that it bothered her that he wasn't around. That it was just me, the bodyguard, picking her up from work.

"I will."

The air was thick with this uncomfortable tension, and we fell into silence. Feeling her gaze on me again, I shifted in my seat, glancing over at her with questioning eyes.

"Why did he do that?" she asked, her voice filled with curiosity.

*I've asked myself that same question.* "Stepan likes giving gifts," I said with a shrug, knowing it wasn't the answer she wanted to hear. Hell, it was an answer that didn't make much sense, but I didn't know what else to say. I added, "Extravagant gifts."

She nodded, staring out the window.

"How did that make you feel?" I asked, feeling like a damn therapist. "Him giving you such a nice gift."

She scoffed. "*Nice?* It's beyond nice. It's almost too much. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm more than flattered and it was so kind of him, but it's just... I've never had someone give me a fucking apartment!" She sounded exasperated, surprising me with her profanity. I liked it, though. It showed a kind of strength in her.

*A fucking apartment in his name,* I wanted to say, though I bit my tongue. Instead, I said, "I understand. But don't feel obligated to pay him back. He wouldn't want that. A thank you is more than enough." *Don't feel pressured to date him.*

“There isn’t a thank you big enough for something like that,” she said pensively, looking into her lap.

Pulling up to the building, I put the car in park and looked over at her. She stared at me, her face partially illuminated by the street lamps. The subtle, dim lighting and complete silence had somehow made things more... *intimate*.

“I’m serious,” I said, taking myself by surprise. I hadn’t meant to sound so assertive. “Don’t feel pressured to return the favor, in any way. I don’t care if he bought you a box of chocolates or the goddamn moon—you’re not an object someone can buy. Remember that.”

She stared at me, her eyes open wide as she sat there, speechless. The air crackled with apprehension in the silent car. Maybe I was too intense and completely out of line, but something had ignited within me. I felt protective over her. Stepan would cut off my nuts if he heard me talking to her that way, but I didn’t care. She needed to hear those words—and if it cost me my nuts, then so be it.

“I will,” she answered softly. Her head tilted slightly, curiously trying to read me. I liked that she wasn’t rushing to get out of the car. That she wanted to sit here and talk with me. After a moment of speculation, she mused, “You’re not like him.”

“No,” was all I could answer, my gaze softening as it dropped to her lips for only a second.

“You’re not like anyone,” she said, eyes squinted as she peered at me with scrutiny.

Was that a compliment or an insult? I would gladly admit that I wasn’t like the others in the *bratva*. They’ve said it to me more than once, though it was usually in a mocking way.

“I’m not,” I answered honestly. *And I don’t want to be. I don’t ever want to be like him—bloodthirsty and devious.* Not all *bratva* men were bad, but they all did bad things. Terrible, deplorable things. Things that I never in my life imagined myself doing; it had never been my plan. Yet there I was.

“Why are you... with them?” she asked carefully, looking as though she was scared that I might get angry about the question.

“Them?”

“The—ah... the *bratva*.” She swallowed deeply, then waved her hands around nervously. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t ask that, I know. It’s just... you seem... I don’t know, destined for something else? Something better.”



I turned in my seat, creasing my eyebrows and staring at her intently. “I could say the same about you, Isabel.”

A look of embarrassment flushed across her cheeks, and she looked down. “I, um, I...”

“You don’t need to explain... I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that either.”

She glanced up momentarily. “It’s okay...”

We watched each other for a long, static moment. This wasn’t the plan. This wasn’t how it was supposed to be. I was supposed to just drive her home, not have some heart-to-heart or any kind of personal connection. Yet, my thoughts went to places they never should have.

*I wish I could wrap my arms around your body and feel it pressed against mine. I wish I could feel your soft lips kissing me all over my face. I wish I could drive you home like this every night.*

*I wish Stepan didn’t want you.*

She slowly shifted closer, making her intent to be near me obvious. Clenching my jaw, I reached out and brushed her cheek with the pad of my thumb. She closed her eyes for a second, then opened them again. Just when I thought we were going to make the biggest mistake of our lives and give in to this, she gasped and jerked her head down.

“Oh my God! It’s my ma!”

I looked around, seeing an older version of Isabel clutching her handbag to her ribs and looking around as she crossed the street toward the bus stop. She looked frail, skinny, with a few streaks of gray in her dark hair. I watched until she stepped onto the bus, and it drove away.

“She’s gone,” I said softly. “We should get you inside.”

I opened my door and stepped out, knowing that she was looking at me with trepidation. It wasn’t her mom that broke the spell, it was me, right now, out of obligation. I couldn’t let this happen.

I opened her door and when she stepped out, she made no eye contact at all. I followed her inside to make sure she made it to her door safely. I didn’t trust that landlord of hers; when Stepan made the transaction the man looked seedy, greasy, too eager.

Isabel slid her key into the lock but didn’t turn it. Instead, she turned around and looked up at me with those wide, glimmering, soul-capturing eyes.

It was all I could take.

I grabbed her waist and pushed her up against the wall, crushing my mouth against hers. She moaned in approval and wrapped her arms tight around my neck. My lips pushed her mouth open, and our tongues met in the middle, sliding past each other in desperate eagerness to taste one another. And God all-fucking-mighty, she tasted good. Salty, sweet, smooth, hot. I needed more of her, so much more.

She placed her soft hands on my cheeks, warming them with her gentle caresses, while I squeezed her hips, nearly animalistic. I felt her leg curl around mine and took the hint, sliding my hands down to cup her magnificent ass and lift her up. She blew her hot breath into my mouth and wrapped both legs around my waist, diving back in to kiss me just as hungrily as I was kissing her.

I pressed my body against hers and she pressed back, I could feel her breasts crushing against my chest, her thighs squeezing me, pulling me impossibly closer to her.

I shoved up against her, grinding my hard cock into her heated core and she let out a rasping, desperate moan.

It woke me up.

I froze, holding her against the wall, feeling my cheeks heat up in anger.

What the fuck was I doing? *Jesus Christ!* What was I doing?

I set her down and backed away, holding my hands out as though they were covered in blood. They might as well have been—my own blood. Isabel's blood. Because if Stepan knew what had just happened, he'd not only torture me for life, but he'd kill her.

He would.

He was the *bratva* boss. He was ruthless. He was proud. He was jealous. He was *possessive*.

When I lifted my eyes to Isabel, she was staring at me with a heaving chest, looking lost. I could see in her eyes that she was confused, that she wanted me and couldn't understand why I'd pulled away so abruptly.

But this was no longer about my own life. *Blyat'!* *I'd give my life for this woman in a fucking heartbeat!* This was about her life now. We'd crossed a line. One that could never be uncrossed. A line that put everyone's lives in danger. Even her mom's, if it came down to it.

"This," I said darkly, anger rising in my voice. "Can *never* happen again."

"Alek—" she started, her voice cracking.

"Isabel, hear me now," I spoke slowly and clearly, even while my heart

thumped in my chest at the sight of her breaking heart. “Never, *ever*, again.”

I turned and walked away. The sound of my boots echoing in the hallway was deafening, but when I stopped to look back at her and saw her face dropped into her hands, her shoulders shaking slightly, my hearing hollowed out.

I left, hardened and cold. No matter how badly I wanted her, it wasn't worth risking her life.

WITH A SMILE, STEPAN PLACED A HAND ON MY SHOULDER AND SQUEEZED. “You're my right-hand man, Aleksei. My best friend. I trust you with my life. No one else. For that reason, I'm assigning you as Isabel's bodyguard. From now on, you'll watch over her, protect her.” He made his way back to his dressing mirror and pulled his shirt straight.

*Fuck.*

He wanted me to be her bodyguard? *Yebat'*... he didn't realize the risk of that. I wanted to be loyal to him, but this was like walking on the edge of insanity. I would certainly lose my mind if I had to spend more time with her... yet, I didn't want to lose my life.

“I will.” I grew somber, deep in thought about how I'd handle this. When I looked up, the sight of him struggling with his arm sling awoke another train of thought.

“Maybe you shouldn't do business with that man again,” I said, motioning to his sling. “Especially if I'll be watching over Isabel and not guarding you anymore.” No matter what kind of reputation the *bratva* had, it wasn't a usual thing to be shot at. Especially not the boss. I didn't like the position he was putting himself in with this particular deal.

Stepan weighed his head to the side. “Dima may be a rough bargaining prick but he's a great asset. The shit he can provide is pure. Fucking *amazing*. I could peddle loads of it. Imagine the profit, Aleksei.” He chuckled, shaking his head. “Sometimes you have to take a few punches to get to the good shit.”

I scoffed lightly in disagreement. “How can we trust a man who we've never heard of before? He has no references, no *bratva* family or connections. We won't even know where to look for him if shit goes sour again.”

Stepan waved away my concerns, careless as ever. “You worry too much,

*priyatel'.*”

I shut my mouth. He was the boss.

“I’m going to Isabel’s for the evening,” he announced, adding a little cologne.

“Isabel’s?” I asked. “What do you mean?” He’d never been to her apartment. Why would he go there? I remembered the fact that I’d been there, outside her door, very clearly, and it put me on edge.

Stepan smiled. “Her mother got my phone number from the landlord and called earlier. Said she wanted to cook me dinner as a thank you. Kind woman. Even apologized for the short notice, but said that Isabel would be home soon, and she’d love for us all to eat together.”

He smiled, satisfied. “If I can win over her mother, maybe Isabel will finally give herself up to me.”

My insides churned to the point of nausea. *Give herself up to me.* What, like a fucking cooked pig on a silver platter? Like she needed so much convincing just to let him touch her? Wasn’t that sign enough that she didn’t truly want him?

In my position, however, there was nothing I could do but nod and wish him good luck.

## CHAPTER 5

# ISABEL



I'd just gotten home from visiting Inessa when I stepped into the apartment and saw my mother frantically sweeping the floor, pushing past me in her bustle.

"*Uyti s dorogi!*" she scolded. Get out of the way!

My eyes scanned the room, landing on the kitchen table where three plates were set.

"Why are there three plates? Is Oleg home?" How would that be possible? He was in the military, and, as far as I knew, he wouldn't be home for a long time. Maybe he was released early for some reason.

My mother chuckled, dumping the dustpan into the trash. "No, dear. Stepan is coming over."

*Stepan?*

My cheeks flushed at my mother's mention of his name, instantly sending my heart into overdrive as I quickly hung up my bag and coat. *Stepan's coming over? Yebena met!* Holy shit! I hadn't seen him in weeks and now he would be here. *In my home.*

"Why?" was all I could muster.

On one hand, I was excited about his coming arrival. He was a handsome man and respectful at the club, even if pushy about dating me. He kept me from having to deal with other, sleazy patrons. After his absence lately, I realized how his presence at the club had made me feel confident and safe. On the other hand... my stomach twisted in anticipation. Did he know what happened between me and Aleksei? Surely not. Judging by the absolute fear in Alek's eyes that morning, he would never tell.

I knew that was why he ended the kiss. Because of Stepan. But my stupid

heart couldn't get over the anger in his voice, the way he looked at me with something like disgust. The way he was so *vehemently* against touching me. It was enough to break any girl's heart.

I didn't have time to even consider how I might act around Stepan because no sooner had I asked why, there was a knock on the door. I stared at my mother with my mouth gaped open and my eyes wide as I tried to get my bearings. My heartbeat thrummed with an intensity I was finding hard to control.

Shaking her head at my paralysis, my mother answered the door. "Hello," she said in a cheery tone. "You must be Stepan."

On the other side of the door stood Stepan, dressed in black slacks and a neat shirt, wearing a leather jacket. His blond hair was swooped to one side in a clean-cut fashion. With a charming smile, his eyes met mine, making me wonder why I was even nervous.

I had to admit to myself that he certainly looked good. It didn't matter that Aleksei made my insides melt and that I wanted to give up my virginity to him right there in the hallway, which was exactly the problem. He was too much. He made me lose my mind. He was a risk, a passionate, dangerous flame that would burn me given the chance! Hell, he already had.

Stepan was the safe choice. He made my heart flutter with that cute grin of his, and that was enough. I felt calm in his presence.

"I am," he answered my mother, stepping through the threshold as she ushered him inside. "And you must be Isabel's sister."

Mama giggled, brushing her hair back flirtatiously. With a playful swat to his arm, she cooed, "Oh, you!"

Stepan winced when she nudged him, and she quickly recoiled in uncertainty. He forced a smile and said, "No need to worry. I'm just getting over a little injury." Pulling his jacket to the side, he showed his sling.

"A little injury?" My mother stepped forward, inspecting his sling. "Oh, dear, this is more than a little injury! What happened?"

Nervous laughter escaped my lips, claiming both of their attention. I didn't want him to talk about bratva business around my mother. I opened my mouth to come up with some excuse, but Stepan was one step ahead of me.

"I was in an accident. Nothing too major, but I did walk away with a nasty wound." With a dashing smile, he managed to silence my mother's questions. She simply nodded with a smile and invited him to sit at the table.

"Dinner is just about done. The potatoes need a few more minutes." She

pulled out a chair, telling him, “Sit, sit.” Then, she shot me a look, eyeing his jacket.

I helped him take off his jacket and hung it alongside mine at the door. Meanwhile, my mother was offering him every drink in the house.

“Water will be fine,” he said with a charming smile.

“Isa, *meelaya*, would you mind?”

She forced a smile, though I could tell she was gritting her teeth behind it. She always did that when she tried to be stern but polite. Like when my brother and I would misbehave in church. She didn’t want to yell at us in front of her fellow churchgoers, so she would force a smile and kindly tell me to behave, her teeth never separating as she spoke.

“Oh, uh, yeah. Sure.” I grabbed an empty glass and filled it with water from the pitcher in the fridge. It was tap, but he didn’t need to know that. In my mother’s eyes, as long as the pitcher looked fancy, the water was too. As I filled the water, my mother mumbled from the corner of her mouth, “The man paid for our apartment, the least you could do is be a good host.”

She’d been dead set on me dating Stepan ever since the landlord told her about the purchase of the apartment. I assumed this whole dinner was her way of pushing me a little harder. I mean, she wasn’t wrong. Stepan was handsome, charming, and eloquent. He had money, which meant stability and security. Who wouldn’t be interested?

How could I deny myself the possibility of love from a man who looked at me like that? The way Aleksei looked at me must have been lust. That’s all that was. He wasn’t trying to win my heart, and he wasn’t even trying to get into my pants—any more—he didn’t want to, not badly enough anyway. I couldn’t help the glaringly obvious fact that it was what I craved from him. I still dreamed of him. But he pushed me away, while this man, this handsome, wealthy, charming man was doing all he could to pull me closer.

Once the food was on the table, our evening was filled with conversation and laughter. Stepan charmed us both into blushing giggles. It was nice. It was safe. It felt right.

At the end of the evening, Stepan and I stood outside the door for a moment alone. It was nerve-wracking, standing in the exact place where Aleksei and I had lost control a few nights ago. Stepan brushed the back of his finger down my cheek and glanced longingly at my lips.

“I want to kiss you, *malyshka*, but I won’t. Not until you let me take you out.”



He was more of a gentleman than Alek ever could be.

I blushed, casting my eyes down before looking at him through my lashes. “Yes, Stepan. You’ve done so much, not only for me but for my mama as well. I guess... it’s safe to say you’ve earned that date.” I smirked, using a playful tone to show that I was keen, but not falling at his feet.

His grin was wide, elated. “Wonderful. I’ll arrange it.”

He swooped in and for a second, I thought he might kiss me after all, but his lips merely brushed against my cheek. I watched him walk away, biting my lip, and smiled when he glanced over his shoulder with a wink before disappearing around the corner.

A FEW NIGHTS LATER, STEPAN HANDED ME A BOUQUET OF DEEP-RED ROSES. With his charming smirk, he held out his hand to escort me to his car.

“You’re absolutely stunning,” he whispered in my ear, sending goosebumps down my arms. I glanced down at my simple black dress that hugged my hips and pulled in as a halter at my neck, accentuating my busty chest. Inessa and I spent hours finding the right dress at the shops the previous day; I used some extra cash I’d made from Stepan’s tips, and Essa even contributed, no matter how much I protested.

“This is the moment, Isabel! This is your moment to land the perfect husband!” she’d said. My excitement rose with every word and every minute that brought me closer to this date with Stepan.

“You look very handsome, yourself,” I said shyly. He donned an expensive-looking suit. I noticed the silver rings on his fingers and matching cufflinks peeking out from his jacket.

He took me to a restaurant I’d never been to, with cuisine I could never afford even with my job at the club. Though he wanted to order me red wine, I didn’t care for alcohol after the childhood I had with my alcoholic father, so I politely declined. When he didn’t argue or try to convince me otherwise, I felt a certain kind of respect for him. Once again, I felt reassured that Stepan truly cared for me.

When we finished our meal, he drove me home. Escorting me to my door, he paused. Finally, ending my nervous anticipation, he leaned in closer and brushed his lips against mine in a gentle kiss. Our first kiss. It was perfect; a

moment I would never forget. For the first time in my life, I experienced true romance.

FOR THE NEXT FEW WEEKS, WE CONTINUED TO DATE. WHETHER WE WENT TO A restaurant, out dancing, or even for a stroll through the park, it was pure bliss. He couldn't be at the club for every shift, understandably, but he'd paid Boris enough money to ensure that I wouldn't be giving lap dances. I knew this because Boris was also told to pay me a cut of that money, so I wouldn't lose out on the tips. I was only allowed on the pole, no touching, unless it was Stepan himself asking for the lap dance.

Aleksei was there too. Every shift. Even without Stepan. Glaring at me.

When I saw him for the first time after what had happened, I felt my heart clench in pain, remembering the look of horror on his face and the feeling of utter rejection in my gut. But then, as a rush of self-preserving strength, my pain turned to anger. I glared right back at him, pressing my lips together and lifting my chin.

I strutted past him, not even giving him the satisfaction of greeting him, and dropped into the lap of my welcoming, smiling Stepan. Sometimes I'd catch Aleksei watching me as I danced for Stepan, and I'd hold his gaze, spitefully moving my body in slow, seductive sways, until he clenched his jaw and looked away.

It hurt. Even though I covered it with anger, it hurt when he looked away. It felt like he was disgusted with me, not only for being a dancer, but for dancing for Stepan. For succumbing to his advances and letting him touch me so much more intimately than before we started dating. I even felt that maybe I was the one that was disgusted with myself, for letting Aleksei touch me like that, so many weeks ago.

But what the fuck did he expect of me? Stepan was doing everything right. He was the one who made me feel worthy and valued.

It came to a point, one night, when Aleksei was there without Stepan, doing whatever his duty was, and pulled me into the empty dressing room.

"You need to stop," he said darkly, still holding my arm and looking down at me fiercely.

"Stop what?" I asked, crossing my arms and throwing my hip out

defiantly.

“Making it so fucking obvious. If you keep teasing me, if you keep looking my way, Stepan will become suspicious. And trust me, it won’t take much suspicion for him to dig a little deeper and then slice both of our throats.”

I barked out a laugh. “Like you care, Aleksei. I don’t even know why you’re here. It’s obvious that you don’t want to be, so just leave!”

“I can’t,” he said through gritted teeth.

I closed my eyes and sighed. “I don’t give a shit what your job description is, just leave me alone, okay?”

I tried to leave, but he pulled me back, staring down at me with that intensity, his thick chest heaving with emotion. I glared at him angrily as I watched him gather his self-control, then I ripped my arm from his tight grip and walked away.

## CHAPTER 6

# ALEKSEI



Every night I watched Isabel dancing, rolling her hips around, bobbing and swaying, I knew it was for me. Not because she was flirting, oh no. Because she was being spiteful. I could see it in her fiery, burning eyes. She was offended that I'd pushed her away weeks ago. And I fucking wished that she knew how much strength it took me to do that.

I couldn't do anything to stop this tension or her spite or the knots that formed in my gut every time she looked at me like she hated me. I had to be there, whether Stepan was there or not. I couldn't even decide which was worse—when he was there and she danced in his lap—or when he wasn't, and she slid down that pole with her eyes on me, knowing I couldn't touch her. Or, wouldn't, touch her.

It was goddamn torture. All I wanted was to take her home, remove all the glitter and restrictive lingerie, and be with her alone. Naked. Touching her and kissing her. To show her what sexuality was really about—a connection of the souls, without all this money, sweat, and alcohol. It left a bad taste in my mouth, and I wished I could take her away from all of it.

It had been about two weeks since I had pulled her aside to ask her to stop her spiteful shit. She had calmed down somewhat, perhaps forgetting I was even there. Maybe she'd moved on and actually did develop true feelings for him. It was what I needed from her—for us to survive—but Jesus Christ, it was not what I wanted. When she did look my way, I couldn't tell if it was pain or hatred in her eyes. But it didn't matter. It couldn't matter.

I was standing in the back corner, in the shadows, trying to keep myself unseen and unheard—as a bodyguard should be—when I saw fucking Boris get a little handsy with Isabel.

“Now, you listen to me,” he said, holding her arm and pointing his fat finger in her defiant face. “You will give a private dance to that man over there, because so help me God, if you start losing me customers, you’ll be out on the goddamn street—”

“What was that, Boris?” I asked, pushing between the two of them. Neither of them had seen me coming, and while Isabel looked away in annoyance, it seemed to me the color drained from the manager’s face. “Something about putting Isabel on the goddamn street?” I leaned in close, bending down to his level, breathing heavily against his face.

“I can’t run a business like this!” He yelled at me. I felt the light spray of his spit against my cheek, and I drew in a calming breath.

“Alek—” Isabel said, pulling at my upper arm, though it didn’t even budge me. “I can handle this myself! This is my place of work! I will deal with it!”

“Oh no,” I said in a low, dangerous voice. My eyes were glued to Boris’s, and he gulped, even as he stood his ground. “A lot of Koslov money has come through this shithole. You can be glad Stepan himself isn’t here, because his beating wouldn’t be as swift as mine.”

I grabbed him by the throat and pushed him back, right into his office. Isabel fluttered around us like a fucking bird, but I didn’t hear any other commotion from the club—no one had even noticed, or no one really cared.

In his office, I pinned him down to his desk, pulled my arm back, and thrust my fist into his jaw.

“Ah!” he cried out, his hands wailing around, scratching my arm.

“Stop!” Isabel yelled.

The music was too loud, the bass vibrating too hard, for anyone to hear either of them.

I pulled back for a second punch, this time splitting his lip open with the signet ring on my finger. Then another, against his cheekbone, slicing the skin there as well.

*It’s like painting a picture, I’d always thought. Spread the pain, spread the blood, spread the fear.*

His blood dripped from my hand as I pointed my finger at his face. “Isabel stays on the pole, you fucking disgrace of a man. *Slabaya suchka,*” I growled. Weak bitch. I gave him one last shove against the desk before walking out of the office.

“I KNEW YOU WERE THE MAN TO TRUST, ALEK,” STEPAN SAID PROUDLY. Isabel stood with her arms crossed, looking absolutely pissed. We were still at the club, later in the evening. I’d of course called Stepan to let him know of the incident, and he’d made sure to be here to soothe her ruffled feathers.

“*Malyshka...*” He cooed, brushing her hair behind her ear, even though she pulled away. “With men like that, boundaries have to be set. He crossed a line, and he paid for that. Don’t you understand?”

“No!” she exploded. “I was working here before you ever showed up. This is where I make my money! This is how I’m going to pay for college! If you screw that up for me, I swear—”

“What?” Stepan asked blandly, shutting her up, daring her to answer. She squeezed her lips together, looking away. He put his finger under her chin and brought her gaze back to his. “I’ve told you before, and I’ll say it again. Quit this place. I’ll look after you. I’ll pay your college tuition, if you still want it, once you’ve seen the kind of life I can give you.”

I ground my teeth together. I had no idea that was the reason she was working here. It made sense now, that a woman of her caliber was shredding her dignity here for the chance at opportunity. She was saving for her education, her fucking future. I felt myself soften even more toward her, the respect I already had for her growing into admiration for her strength and determination.

But, the way Stepan chucked her dreams aside like it meant nothing, truly pissed me off.

“I won’t rely on you, or anyone else, to look after me,” Isabel said, her voice quieter, but her eyes still blazing. “This is my life, and I’ll handle it myself.”

“Okay, okay,” Stepan held up his hands in surrender, which I knew was fake. The man never let up on anything in his life. “But then, you’ll need to deal with Alek beating the shit out of your disrespectful boss from time to time, okay?” He grinned.

She looked at me, angrily, then scoffed with her notorious eye roll.

“Good,” Stepan took that as acceptance and pulled her face to his for a kiss. “Shift’s over,” he said and smacked her ass playfully. “Go get dressed, and we’ll meet you out back.”

She headed to the dressing room, silently fuming. Stepan stood, shaking

his head like she was an insolent toddler, then wrapped an arm around my shoulder. “Aleksei. Let’s go out back, and you can tell me about the new shipment.”

We stood in the shadows by the back door of the club. Stepan lit up a cigarette, taking a long pull before he asked, “So?”

With a sigh, I said, “The shipment came in successfully. Strong shit, according to the guys who handed it off.” It wasn’t Dima himself, but his men who I’d met with. “We should have no problem selling it.”

Stepan nodded with satisfaction, his eyes lit up in the neon glow that extended through the shadows. “Perfect. I’ll be testing it tonight.”

“Hold up,” I said. He looked up at me curiously. “Boss. No disrespect, but every dealer knows not to use their own product. You get the shit and sell it. That’s it.”

My tone was stern, but he needed to hear me. Stepan came to me when he wanted advice, and that’s what I was going to provide. Especially now that he had a girl like Isabel involved in his shit. When I saw him about to do something stupid in the business, I had to speak up—he understood that.

“Aleksei, we need to test the product.” He shrugged, like it was obvious. “Find out if his guys were being truthful when they said it was good shit. If the potency is as they claim, then I know they can be trusted in the future.”

I shook my head slightly. “You start testing that shit, you’ll get hooked on it. You’ll waste profit using your own product. I’m telling you this as brotherly advice, don’t do it. You’ll end up regretting it.”

I held his gaze, unrelenting. After a moment, Stepan stood back to lift his chin at me.

“I understand your concern, *priyatel’*, but have a little faith that I have more control than that. A simple test won’t hurt our profit. One time, just to see if it’s as they claim. Then, we’ll sell the rest. Hm?”

Without saying a word, I simply watched him.

His eyes narrowed slightly, and he took a step forward, straightening his body. “I appreciate your direct honesty in advising me, but let’s not forget who the boss is, Alek. I make the final decision, about this and everything else. I am the king of the *bratva*. Remember that.”

I stared at him hard, not saying a word. He’d always been spoiled and used to getting his way. He was tough, took no shit. At the same time, there’d always been a charm, a charisma, that he used to get his way. This was different; not the man I knew. Since he started doing business with this new



guy, he'd been behaving differently. This idea of him being the bratva king had gone to his head more than usual.

"Trust me," I said, my tone serious. "I will remember this conversation."

OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS, STEPAN WAS AT THE CLUB ALMOST EVERY NIGHT. And when Isabel wasn't working, he took her out. I figured he was making up for the tension that had formed with her the other night, and it seemed to be working.

Isabel's face lit up whenever he walked into the room. She flew into his lap, flirted with her red fingernail touching his cheek, and shook her ass for him, laughing as he played with her luscious cheeks.

She was his girl. I had no doubt that he cared for her, he just showed it in different ways than... normal, gentlemanly men would. She was a prized possession to him, an object, something to claim and own. It did mean that he would protect her with every ounce of power he had, that I was sure of.

Thankfully, Isabel saw herself as more than an object, which she made obvious in her clever quips to the customers who tried their luck. She valued herself. But how much time with Stepan would change that? How long would it take for her to *truly* become his? The thought made my stomach churn.

Every night, I had to remind myself that this was my job. This was my duty. A long time ago, I was forced into this life, and once you're in, you never get out. It was my life sentence.

I just wished I didn't have to see her so often. I wished I wasn't her damn bodyguard. I wished I didn't fucking want her so bad.

I wished I didn't *need* her like this.

## CHAPTER 7

# ISABEL



Aleksei's darkened, crushing stare was becoming too much for me. There was this tightening in my chest whenever I walked out on the stage, putting one alarmingly tall heel in front of the other, swinging around the pole, and carefully searching the darkness of the club floor for his harsh glare.

It was always there, in the back, like two glowing embers in the head of a thick, muscled hunk of a man. His wide shoulders were always relaxed, his chin held high, and his hands clasped together in front. Sometimes I caught myself staring purely because he was such a beautiful man. I now knew what those large hands could do, and I didn't mean clutch my ass up against a wall until I almost popped—they were dangerous. Lethal.

After the night he beat Boris's face purple, red, and blue, people around the club gave him a wide berth. And, to be honest, they avoided me as well, because they knew he was there for me. To watch me. Protect me.

*But never have me.*

I had to physically shove my attraction to him deep down and lock it away because I knew better than to give in to that desire again. Not only because I was technically Stepan's girl now, but because I refused to be denied like that again. Rejected by the man I most desired, left hurt and alone.

But things got better. Stepan really turned up the charm. He respected my wishes to keep working at the club and even embraced it by coming more often, encouraging me and keeping Boris satisfied with stacks of cash in envelopes delivered to his office.

Aleksei was still around, but I didn't see him anymore. I only saw Stepan,

the sexy blond with the single silver earring and light blue eyes. And he only saw me, never even giving the other girls the satisfaction of a glance in their direction.

None of it even mattered anymore the night Stepan finally claimed me.

He drove me deep into the city, where the elite walked the streets in Bespoke suits and mink coats with emerald teardrop earrings. I looked around in wonder as we entered a hotel that reached up into the clouds while a valet boy drove Stepan's Aston Martin away, God knows where.

We walked right past the reception desk, and I noticed the glances. People knew Stepan here. Women looked me up and down, and men cast their eyes away in preservation of their lives. Though I was dressed in my simple gray coat and black knee-high heeled boots, I held my head high. I was on the arm of Stepan Koslov, a man wanted and feared by all.

We stepped into the elevator, surrounded by mirrors, and Stepan pulled me into his arms.

"You look like a dream, tonight, my love."

I just about swooned, relieved that he was holding me upright. "You spoil me, Stepan."

"Oh no," he chuckled, shaking his head. "You haven't seen anything yet."

I smiled, feeling drunk on love, and he kissed me with passion. The elevator dinged and the doors slid open to reveal an elderly couple looking shocked by our public display of affection. Or, rather, sexual desire.

It was clear that it would happen tonight. I was finally going to feel like a *real* woman and take pleasure from a man who couldn't keep his hands off me. After all, I was 20 years old. It was long past due, but I was so happy that I'd waited for a man like him.

If I'd given my body up to Aleksei that morning months ago, I'd be filled with regret right now. But I didn't, and I felt proud of that. Stepan was the ideal first. He was sweet, considerate, and clearly, very giving. I knew enough about sex to know that would be a big plus.

When we stepped into the suite, my eyes grew with wonder. It was huge! Not just a bedroom but a lounge with a bar, not just a balcony but a deck with a jacuzzi! I dropped my bag on the couch and swirled around to Stepan.

"Wow! This is amazing!"

He grinned happily, pulling me into his arms. "I knew you'd love it." He kissed me, long and deep. I thought, *this is it; it's happening!* But he had other ideas. "There's something else," he murmured against my lips.

I frowned playfully and pulled my coat off. “What else could there possibly be?”

He smirked as he walked over to the bathroom door, revealing another massive room, sparkling with small downlights. “You didn’t think I’d ask you to share my bed, without wining and dining you first?” I cocked my head in confusion. Surely dinner wasn’t awaiting us in the bathroom?

He peered inside. “Ah, there it is.” When he emerged, he held a hanger on the tip of his finger. There hung a gorgeous, long, slim evening dress in the softest, most delicate material I’d ever felt. It had slits up the legs and a plunging neckline.

I gasped. “Stepan! You didn’t!”

His grin widened. “Oh, I did. Gucci. Just for you.”

Ten minutes later, I glided out of the bathroom, floating on a cloud of happiness. Stepan was at the room’s bar, sipping on a crystal tumbler of whiskey with his hand in his pocket. When he saw me, he set the glass down and held his hands out.

“Oh, my beautiful, *beautiful* queen!”

I giggled and twirled around, allowing the dress to ripple around my legs. There was even a pair of stunning black Jimmy Choo’s awaiting me in the bathroom. He set his hands on my waist and looked over my body hungrily. His lips found their way to my neck, kissing me along my collarbone.

“Oh, Isabel...” he moaned. “Dinner can wait, can’t it?”

I chuckled, pushing him away. “You’re the one who said it; we won’t share a bed until you’ve wined and dined me. Although, I’m not too sure about the wine part...”

He smiled, biting his lip and looking at me with a glint in his eye. “You just haven’t tasted the right wine, my darling.”

A small, fleeting uneasiness entered my stomach. I was pretty set on not drinking, I always had been. I’d never been drunk, and I didn’t really plan on it happening in the future. But... maybe... one glass wouldn’t hurt?

We took the elevator up to the very top floor. The doors slid open to reveal a glimmering, embellished, extravagant restaurant. This time, the looks I received were that of respect and wonder. It was amazing what a quality designer dress could do. We were seated at what seemed to be the best table in the house—right against the glass pane—with a view of the city.

Stepan might have been right. The wine I sipped on went down very smoothly, not that I had much to compare it to. Along with my expertly

prepared medium-rare steak and sauteed vegetables, it was without a doubt, the best meal I'd ever had.

Would Aleksei go to this extent? No. He was ready to take my virginity in a hallway, much less feed me beforehand.

Ah! Why was I even thinking of him? That was months ago now. He meant nothing to me. Of course, I would still find him mouth-wateringly sexy, that was human nature and clearly wouldn't change, but when it came to matters of the heart, Stepan took first place. By far.

When we made it back to the suite, I was definitely feeling the effects of the wine. I put the back of my hand to my forehead and sighed. "Stepan, I think the wine was too much. I feel..."

"Don't worry about it, *kukla*," he purred, approaching me from behind and wrapping his arms around my waist. "It will only make this more fun."

His lips pressed against my neck, and I took his words to heart. That was what people said about alcohol anyway, right? There had to be a reason everyone loved to drink so much. I just wished I didn't feel so queasy.

"Um, Stepan... there's something you need to know."

I turned around to face him, and he continued to kiss my neck, sliding his hands down my sides. "Hm?"

"I've never... done this before."

He froze.

His head lifted, and he looked into my eyes. I suddenly worried that it was a problem; that he would find me so much less attractive for it, that he wouldn't want to sleep with such an inexperienced woman.

"*Malyshka*..." he drew the word out. "That is the best news I've ever heard in my entire life." His eyes darkened, losing any sense of softness.

"Really?"

He gripped my hips to the point of pain and pulled me against him. I felt his excitement against my belly. "I had my suspicions, but to hear that I'll be the first man to ever have you... *O Bozhe moi*, I'm fucking elated!"

"Good, I was worried that—Oh!"

He lifted me by the waist and threw me onto the plush, king-sized bed. I bounced and my head spun for a moment. I felt uncertain. Did I want this right now while my head was spinning? With the way Stepan was acting, there was no turning back.

"My heels—" I started to say, not wanting to dirty the crisp white duvet.

"Leave them on; it's so much hotter that way. You'll see."

“Oh, okay...”

He lay down on the bed beside me, taking his time to brush my hair away from my face. His warm hand caressed my cheek as he looked into my eyes. His gentle touch was like a soothing balm to my soul, and I felt a profound sense of comfort and safety in his arms. I knew that I could trust him with all of my heart. “Do you even know how beautiful you are?”

I began to melt. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all. I still felt a little dizzy, but he took my mind off that when he brushed his lips against mine. He kissed me softly, slowly, gliding his hand down my arm and onto my hip.

This was nothing like it was with Aleksei, and I was grateful for that. It felt planned and coaxing, not spontaneous and shocking. Though... I did really, *really* enjoy that spontaneity at the time...

Stepan deepened our kiss. His tongue slid across my bottom lip, and I sighed, relaxing my limbs.

“That's it, baby,” he murmured and moved his kisses to my neck, just behind my ear. “Just relax and enjoy it...”

And I did. His hand explored my body, sliding over my hip to cup my ass, giving it a wobble, just like he liked to do at the club. Sliding the backs of his fingers over my stomach, to brush over my boobs and to tease my nipples through the thin dress. Then he broke away, leaving me dazed, to stand at the foot of the bed.

He kept eye contact as his hands slid up my legs, under my dress, and hooked into my panties. He drew them down while I swallowed deeply, and he pulled them over my heels, chucking them over his shoulder.

He reached out and grabbed my hips, pulling me down the bed. He pushed my legs open and feasted on the sight of me, untouched, pink, and glistening. I looked up at him with my eyes full of longing and bit my lip, making him sigh with desire. He leaned in closer, his breath brushing against my skin, and I felt my heart start to race.

I could feel the electricity between us and knew that this was the moment I had been waiting for. I flinched and wiggled as he continued to push his fingers all the way into me. I sucked in my breath, liking how it felt. His fingers moved in circles, massaging my inner walls and sending pleasure rippling through my body. I let out a soft moan as I felt my pleasure intensify with every stroke. My body tensed up as his fingers moved faster and deeper, pushing me closer and closer to the brink of pleasure.

“OH YES... BABY, I’VE WANTED YOU FOR SO LONG,” HE GROANED. WITHOUT warning, he lowered his head between my thighs and planted his mouth over me.

I gasped in pleasure as his tongue explored my intimate folds. His expert touch sent waves of pleasure rippling through my body. His hands were massaging my hips as I writhed beneath him. I was lost in the moment, completely consumed by the sensations that his touch was eliciting.

“Oh my God!” I stammered. I didn’t expect that. His tongue slid out of his mouth and licked me from bottom to top, swirling around my clit. “Oh, God, yes...” I groaned. This was sensational. This was mind-blowing. This was what all the hype was about!

I opened my legs further for him and threaded my fingers into his blonde hair, messing it up as I clenched my fingers and writhed my body. Stepan’s tongue felt like a lightning bolt of pleasure, sending shivers through my body with each stroke.

My hands tightened in his hair, and I could feel my orgasm building as his tongue explored and teased me. His hands grasped my hips as I moved against him, urging him to go faster and deeper until I reached the peak of pleasure and screamed out my ecstasy.

“Aaah! Oh my God!”

When my trembling had stopped, he lifted his head, licking his lips with a deathly stare in his eyes. “Now that’s a tasty cunt, Isabel.”

The change in his demeanor startled me a little, but I figured it was his raw desire coming out. However, I was beyond shocked when he took my beautiful, delicate dress and ripped it, all the way up the front.

“What—Stepan! What the hell!”

I wasn’t wearing a bra, you couldn’t with a dress like that, so I was left fully exposed, wearing only my heels.

“Don’t worry, darling, I can buy you ten more.”

“That’s not the point...” My voice trailed off when he started undressing.

He removed his shirt, his pants, everything. I gulped audibly when I saw the size of his penis. I knew it was what I wanted—I was already so turned on—but the sight of it was rather terrifying.

“Just remember to relax, baby,” he said as he climbed over me, kissing my skin as he moved up between my thighs.

“Okay,” I said in a shaky voice.

He kissed me deeply, and I sensed the slightly metallic taste of my own



womanhood. He used his fingers to massage my pussy, opening me up, pushing his finger deep into me again, and curling it inside. It felt so good, and soon I was moaning again.

I pulled my legs wide for him and watched as he pumped his dick slowly with his hand. I noticed a little droplet right on the tip and wondered if he was already coming. What was that about? But when he rubbed the thick head along my slit, all thoughts melted away.

He pressed his forehead against mine and whispered sweet nothings to me as he held my thighs open and pushed forward into me. It was painful, and it burned.

“Ah! It—it hurts,” I told him.

“It will, my love, the first time. I promise it will feel good soon.” He moved his hips slowly back and forth, pulling out and pushing back in. “Relax your body, Isabel.”

I did as I was told, and truly, to my surprise, it did start to feel good. “Oh...” I said breathily. “Oh, yes...”

“Fuck, baby,” he moaned and moved faster.

It stung, but overall, I felt the heat build inside of me. It was like I desired him deep within me, but still hurt around the lips on the outside. I guessed it was to be expected.

“Oh, God, you’re so fucking tight!” he groaned.

I felt my orgasm build, and to my sudden surprise, shocking waves of pleasurable heat rushed through me. “Oh, yes! Oh, Stepan! Yes!”

I felt myself clenching around his wide girth and honestly wondered if it was possible for him to get stuck inside of me with the way it felt like such a tight fit. But no sooner had I thought that, when he quickly pulled out of me and wrapped his fingers around his engorged dick, pumping it fast. I watched as he burst all over my stomach, breathing deeply, shuddering violently.

“Fuck... Isabel... You are a goddess... You are...” he shuddered again, “fucking perfect.”

I smiled, still catching my breath and absolutely drained of energy. After Stepan cleaned me up and removed my heels for me, I slept in his strong arms all night.

It turned out, he really was the perfect man to take my virginity.

## CHAPTER 8

# ALEKSEI



“You have no fucking idea how tight this pussy was, boys,” Stepan bragged, and my blood boiled.

We were in the bar inside the Koslov house—rather, the mansion that spanned three townhouses on one of the main streets of the inner-city block. Stepan had invited not only a few of his own bratva men, but some associates as well to share a drink with him tonight.

He had something to celebrate.

“She spread those thick thighs for me like she’d die if I didn’t stick it in her right then!”

The men roared with laughter, while I ground my teeth so hard, I feared they might chisel away.

“And here’s the best part,” Stepan leaned forward, meeting the eyes of every man around him, “she was a fucking *virgin*.”

My stomach dropped in cold dread.

*No. No, Isabel... You couldn’t have been.*

The men cheered for Stepan, some of them getting up to slap him on the back. Fresh tots of whiskey were poured, and conversation buzzed as the men compared stories about their girlfriends, wives, and mistresses. Stepan couldn’t shut up about Isabel, though.

“Oh my God, the way those round tits bounced as I—”

I couldn’t take it. Quietly, I slipped out of the room and walked all the way to the opposite side of the house where my bedroom was.

Since it was originally three townhouses, it had separated spaces. One side was for Stepan’s living quarters with his office and bar. Then there was the middle, a large entertainment area for guests, and then the opposite side

with the kitchen, service rooms, and staff rooms.

I slammed the door behind me and scrunched my fingers into my hair, nearly pulling it out. My eyes squeezed shut.

She was a virgin. Of course. She was so young, and she was saving up for college. She was a good girl, until life diminished her opportunities and forced her into that fucking club.

“Fuuuck!” I shouted, opened my eyes, and threw the chair from my desk across the room. It smashed into pieces against the wall. I looked around, breathing heavily, then approached my bathroom door and punched it. It was solid wood.

I punched it again, again, and again, willing it to break, willing it to absorb all the pain that emanated from my chest. Blood from my knuckles smeared across the door and soaked into the splinters. I turned my back against it and dropped down, burying my head in my hands.

*Isabel...*

*You didn't deserve that... You deserved so much better...*

I was torn apart. This wasn't just another downtown stripper that caught the eye of the wrong man. This was the woman of my dreams. The one I'd once held in my arms and cherished, for a mere minute. A minute that lasted a lifetime in my memories. I played it back every day, whether I wanted it to or not.

I loved her. That much was clear.

But I knew that he would never let her go. Not now. Not anymore. He was too excited, too proud of his sick achievement. She was stuck in this bratva life now, just like me, and the only way out was death.

I WALKED INTO THE CLUB THE FOLLOWING NIGHT, WITHOUT STEPAN. HE WAS meeting with another potential client, a distributor for his precious powder.

Boris saw me, nodded, and turned away to carry on with his business. For the first time since I was assigned to this goddamn club, I took a seat at the bar.

“Vodka,” I said grimly to the bar maiden who'd approached me and leaned over with a smooth smile and her tits spilling from her tiny top. Did she realize her fucking areolas were showing out the top of her bra?

*Probably.*

I was soured by recent events. I was cynical, and angry. Not even with Stepan, or Isabel, but with myself. What was I? A spineless man doomed to live his life according to some other man's destiny and desires?

I couldn't even take what I wanted. No, not *take*. That would make me even worse than Stepan. I couldn't even *fight* for what I wanted. It wasn't on the cards for me.

The bar maiden slid the glass of clear fiery liquid my way and purred. "It's on the house, honey."

*Well, at least that's something.* I took the glass of vodka and sipped it, pulling my lips back over my teeth as I felt the burn.

"Aleksai?"

Isabel's voice sounded next to me, and I clenched my jaw without looking her way.

"Yes?"

"What... Why are you here?" Her voice was softer than usual.

"I'm always here, Isabel."

"No." She put her hand on my arm, and I looked down at it. "I mean, why are you sitting at the bar? You never drink."

I nodded with a sarcastic pull of my lips. "Surprised you noticed that."

"What—oh my God!" She gripped my wrist and pulled my hand toward her. "What happened to your hand?"

I felt the gentle brush of her fingers over the painful cuts on my knuckles. It was soothing. Comforting. *Wrong.*

I pulled my hand away and finally turned to look at her. "None of your business, *sweetheart.*"

I downed the rest of the vodka and stood up to walk to the back of the club. I heard the sound of her heels clicking as she followed me.

"Aleksai!"

I approached a booth and sat down, pushing back with a sigh. She stood in front of me with her hand on her hip. I looked her up and down, not even hiding it. She wore a corset bodice. The sides pulled up high above her sultry hips. Black lace. No pants or skirt. Tits spilling out.

"What happened? Where's Stepan?" she asked, a worried expression on her face.

*Don't worry, your precious bratva king is perfectly fine.*

"He's working." I jerked my chin to her body. "Looking particularly

slutty tonight, Isa. Why don't you do the same and get up on the pole, huh?"

She looked taken aback, hurt. There was no more fire in her eyes. Only shock and confusion. For a moment, just before she turned away, it looked like she might have teared up.

A FEW NIGHTS LATER I WAITED OUTSIDE THE CLUB FOR ISABEL'S SHIFT TO end. Not far off stood the limousine that Stepan had recently decided I was to drive whenever chauffeuring him or Isabel around. It was fucking ridiculous.

Tonight Stepan was here, and he exited the club with a wide smile.

"Alek! My friend. Why so glum?"

I eyed him, not really in the mood to humor his fake concern.

"Don't tell me it's a girl?" he asked, playfully shaking my shoulder. "Were you dumped? Did she die? What?"

I frowned at him, utterly dumbfounded at his complete insensitivity. I guessed it was to be expected when he grew up spoiled and with no true affection from his parents. And, of course, the ruthless way he chose to use his "kingship."

Isabel pushed open the door and smiled. "Hello, boys."

Stepan swooped her up by the waist and kissed her. "I was just questioning Aleksei about his girlfriend."

"Girlfriend?" she asked, quickly looking at me. "I didn't know—"

"Neither did I!" he interrupted. "But it's got to be a girl making him this moody, huh?" he said, and she quietened.

I turned on my heel and headed for the limo, opening the door for her to slip in first, avoiding any eye contact with her. I then hopped into the driver's seat and drove them to Stepan's new rental house here, downtown not far from the club. Ever since he'd started seeing Isabel regularly—sexually—he rented a house to stay in until she agreed to move into his mansion.

Stepan kissed Isabel in the backseat, releasing happy moans and loud smooches. The sound made my stomach twist into knots. "Stepan," Isabel giggled when he'd apparently made his way from her mouth to her neck. Not that I was looking. That was the last image I wanted to see. Even hearing it filled me with ire. I bit back on the bile that rose to my throat.

"Aleksei is right there," she muttered.

“Oh, come on,” Stepan groaned. “Just ignore him. Pretend he’s not there.”

*Fuck you, too.*

“I’m not that kind of girl, Stepan.” Her tone had grown more serious, and I could hear her pushing him away.

Stepan scoffed, clapping his hands with a sharp bang. “Fine. We’ll just wait.”

I couldn’t help myself from rolling my eyes. What was he, a two-year-old? Throwing a tantrum because she didn’t want to have sex in the car with someone else right there?

We pulled up to the rental, and I opened the door, not speaking a word to either of them. Maybe it was because I was having a shitty night, but I didn’t have it in me to fake a smile. I wasn’t a goddamn butler, and I was pissed he treated me like one.

*Right-hand man, my ass.*

Stepan insisted I come inside to prep more product to be moved and to prepare a *single* usage—his emphasis, not mine—to make sure the shit was pure all the way through the shipment. *Yeah right.*

At least I was working on the shit I was *supposed* to do. Bratva shit, not butler shit. And I would’ve had no issues if I didn’t have to listen to them fooling around in the other room. The place was too small. I didn’t want to be there. I didn’t want to hear Stepan’s coaxes, Isabel’s giggles, her soft moans, and his guttural outburst.

*Did she even get to climax?* I quickly stopped myself from straining to hear more of her sweet moans and tried to focus on the task at hand, blocking out the sound of them altogether. Eventually, Stepan came out of the room in a rush, holding his jacket and boots.

“I have to leave,” he said, sliding his boots on and grabbing the keys to his car. “It’s urgent. I got a page from the guys at the hand-off site; some shit went down. Give Isabel a ride home.” He didn’t wait for me to answer before he closed the door and rushed off.

“What’s the magic word?” I asked no one, throwing another pack of powder onto the pile. He’d always been a prick, but lately, it was *too* much. He made me want to knock the fuck out of him—and I was a peaceful guy, the man who never resorted to violence unless necessary. Recently, that was becoming less and less true.

Isabel crept out of the room, her hair slightly disheveled. My eyes lifted

to her, taking in her appearance with a squeeze of my jaw, and she looked away in shame—right at the heap of drugs in front of me.

Her eyes widened, but she knew better than to say anything. I stood up and tilted my head toward the door, shuffling her out like she was an actual plaything of Stepan's; she'd done her job, and now it was time to leave.

I didn't want her to leave. I wanted to keep her here, in this house, alone with me. I wanted to brush my hand over her hair and calm those shot nerves of hers. Brush my lips against hers and whisper that she meant the world to me.

My thoughts went further—I wanted to sit her on the table and kneel before her, to make sure she got that climax she deserved. Over and over again. Twist her around, eat her pussy from behind and play with her clit until she trembled with sexual exhaustion.

But that was not my place.

Besides, it was very possible that Stepan had his security guy rig the place with cameras, since he was keeping so much product here. So, without saying a word, I escorted her to the limousine. She paused and looked at me.

“Do we have to take the limo? It would feel so weird pulling up to my building in one. People will stare... and judge...”

I gave one nod and led her to my car instead, actually relieved that she suggested it. It was just like her. Reasonable, modest. Again, I opened her door without even a glance, closing it after she climbed into the passenger seat. When I settled into place, I started the car, heading back toward her building.

We sat in silence for a few minutes before she said, “I'm sorry for Stepan's behavior earlier. It wasn't right of him to dismiss your presence like that.”

I spoke blandly, staring ahead at the dark road. “Don't worry about it. That's my job, and I'm used to it.”

She turned her head to gaze out the window. “I guess we both have a job that degrades us.” She grew quiet for a moment and added, “Treated a certain way to please the men who are more powerful.” I swore I heard her mutter a curse, though it was hardly a whisper.

“Why are you doing this?” she asked a moment later, catching me off guard.

“Doing what?” I eyed her in my peripheral, unsure what she meant. *Why am I putting up with Stepan's degrading behavior?*



It was a long story that dated back about a decade. A story involving a troubled young kid getting involved with the wrong crowd, earning himself a death sentence, and his older brother stepping in to take on the debt himself.

“Why are you always around? Watching me? Driving me?”

Now, I really was caught off guard. In an obvious tone, I said, “Because it’s my job.”

“Your job?”

“Yeah. You were assigned to me.”

Her voice rose. “Assigned?”

“Yes. I’m your bodyguard. Stepan assigned me to keep you safe and watch over you.”

Her jaw dropped and she scoffed. “So he assigned you to do his job.” There was an underlying level of hurt amongst the irritation. “He could’ve at least told me.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t.”

I pulled up to her building and parked the car, shutting it off. As I opened my door, she grabbed my hand. The simple touch sent emotion swirling through my gut. A wrenching, dangerous kind of emotion. I turned swiftly and stared at her, trying to keep my expression stern and unyielding.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice soft. “Thank you for protecting me. I feel safe with you.”

Those words... They affected me in a way I’d never expected. I sighed, closing my eyes and shutting my door again. All of this anger inside of me seemed to purge from my system, leaving me feeling tired and defeated. As if she sensed it, she quickly released my hand, tucking her hair behind her ear sheepishly.

“I’m sorry. I probably shouldn’t say that—”

Feeling dispirited without my anger stopping me, I grabbed her hand again and ran my thumb over her knuckles. Startled, she faced me. I lifted my eyes to her and said, “I need you to feel safe around me. I’m sorry I’ve been... hostile, recently. But if you feel safe, at least I know I’m doing my job right.”

I nodded, satisfied that I’d buried the hatchet, so to speak, and tried to release my grip. But she tightened her hand around mine, staring into my eyes with that same fire she always held. A swirling flame I could get lost in forever; if only that was possible. Her eyes fluttered slightly, and her lips relaxed. I saw what was coming; it was exactly the same as last time, so I

quickly turned away, creating enough distance to kill whatever was between us, severing any moment of connection, again. I saw the falter in her eyes, the sinking of her shoulders, but I couldn't let that affect me. I got out of the car and escorted her to her door.

The whole scene was extremely, uncomfortably familiar, and I was itching to get out of there.

"Why don't you come inside?" she suggested, holding her key in the door. "As a thank you for driving me home." She must've sensed my coming decline because she quickly added, "My mother would love to serve you a piece of her homemade pie. She's always telling me to be a better host and show gratitude," she chuckled nervously. "Please?"

I shook my head. "I'm sorry. I don't think that would be a good idea."

"It's perfectly innocent, I swear," she said quickly. "My mother will be right there, and she knows I'm with Stepan. She would never let anything scandalous happen. I swear, it's just a polite thank you and nothing more."

I had to admit, I was a little disappointed to hear it was nothing more than good manners. Naturally, I wanted her to desire me, like I desired her. I wanted her to say that she wanted me to *meet* her mother, to be a part of her life, not just to thank me in passing. But I had my head on straight. I put my hand against the wall above her shoulder and leaned in. Her pupils dilated, and her breathing quickened. It gave me some sort of satisfaction.

"We both know it's not a good idea, Isabel. Innocent or not. I can't spend time with you, not any more than is required of me."

She broke eye contact and nodded quickly. "Right, yes, you're right."

I nodded and pushed away, about to say goodnight when she spoke again.

"Is it... Is it because of that girlfriend Stepan was talking about?"

"What?" I asked in confusion.

"Are you... unwilling to spend time with me because you have a girlfriend?"

The thought crossed my mind to say yes, to see if she'd get jealous, but that was not me. I wasn't deceitful. If there was anyone I would never lie to, it would be Isabel. But I had to push her away. She was getting way too friendly with me, and it made things so much more difficult.

"Isabel, you have to understand," my voice deepened, becoming harsh, "we are not friends, you and I."

"Oh," she said, pulling back a bit. It pained me to see that hurt in her eyes.

I pressed on. “Please, focus on Stepan. Do what he says—pretend I’m not here,” I said, unemotionally.

She looked down. “Okay...”

“Good night, Isabel.”

“Good night, Aleksei.”

## CHAPTER 9

# ISABEL



I was in the dressing room at the club, absentmindedly getting my outfit ready. I had the day shift, so it was quiet and I was alone in the room.

My mind felt plagued with the words Aleksei said. *We are not friends, you and I.* It felt obvious. We were *more* than friends. We'd kissed so passionately before, who could possibly be platonic friends after that? I didn't know why I even thought we could be. I guessed I just wanted to get closer to him, to end the animosity that had festered between us ever since then because it made my stomach hurt every time I saw him at the club.

But he was right. I was more intelligent than that—I couldn't be stupid and risk Stepan finding out that I had even a molecule of feelings toward Aleksei. I hadn't seen a whole lot of the *bratva* side of Stepan, but I was sure it wasn't exactly merciful.

Suddenly, someone rushed in behind me, wrapped his arms around my waist, and set his lips to my neck. My first thought was Aleksei. I knew he was already out there in the club. Had he finally decided, *fuck it, I love Isabel, and I want to be with her?*

But, of course, it wasn't him. It was Stepan. I quickly pushed away all thoughts of Alek and focused on the warm feeling of Stepan and his devotion to me. I spun around with a smile. He grinned and kissed me.

"You can't be in here," I said against his lips, giggling naughtily. His hands slithered down to my hips, pulling me closer. I gave him one more kiss and separated myself from his grasp, sitting down at my makeup table. He ambled behind me, leaning down against my seat. I decided to say what had been on my mind. "So, how come you never told me Aleksei was my bodyguard?" I glanced at him through the mirror.

“I didn’t think to mention it,” he answered with a shrug. “I just want you to be safe. Alek is my right-hand man. My most trusted man. You can call on him for anything—he is at your every command.” Resting his chin on my head, he said a little more gently, “Aleksei has been with me for years. He is the only other man you can trust, besides me.”

I hoped he’d never know just how much I already trusted Aleksei.

I nodded, his chin moving with the motion. “I need to get ready,” I reminded him, standing and slipping off my shirt. Stepan unhooked my bra for me, and I stood topless for a moment, grabbing my outfit.

“Isabel, you’re on in five,” Boris said, swinging through the doorway from his office.

“I know,” I called back.

He nodded and walked away, shutting the door. Thinking nothing of it, I slid my arms through the bra I’d be wearing on stage—a much more decorated piece of attire. I caught a glimpse of Stepan’s reflection.

His arms were crossed and eyes narrowed, jaw ticking and tightly clenched. “Why the fuck is he coming in here when you have your shirt off?” he growled, his tone sending a shiver through my spine. “Your nipples were exposed.”

“Don’t worry about him,” I said flippantly. “He never tries anything with the dancers. Business is business.” I tried to laugh it off, hoping it would calm him. But he didn’t calm down. If anything, his annoyance grew. I turned to him. “Look, Boris doesn’t care about hooking up with the dancers. Never use your own product, right?” I repeated the same line I’d heard Boris say once when one of the dancers tried to *persuade* him for a night off and he’d declined. But something about the remark sent a dark flash through Stepan’s eyes, deepening his glare.

“Where the fuck did you hear that?” he asked, stepping forward. His body was tense, his muscles tightened. “Have you been talking to Aleksei about bratva business?”

My head cocked in confusion. “What? No. What are you talking about?”

He stared at me for a moment with a hardened expression. I had no idea what was going on in his mind. I only stared at him, waiting for him to make the next move, to direct which way the conversation would go from here.

“You need to quit,” he said with finality.

I chuckled, as though he was joking. “We’ve discussed this, Stepan. I’m not quitting. This job is my only source of independence—”

He quickly grabbed both of my arms tightly. “*Independence?* Why the fuck would you even want independence? It’s a cold and unforgiving world out there, Isabel!”

I frowned, tipping my head to the side. “I’m not quitting, Stepan. I don’t want to.”

He released me, stepping back slowly and gesturing to my outfit—the flashy bra with tassels, and high-waisted sequin shorts. “Oh, I get it now. You like the attention. You like when other men watch you throw your tits around and shake your damn ass—”

“Stepan!” I shouted. “What is wrong with you?”

He had this crazed look in his eye, a look I didn’t recognize. “What is wrong with *me?*” He shouted back. “You’re the one who gets off on being a slut!”

He pushed me. Hard.

I stumbled back, my heels wobbling and twisting my ankle. I fell to the side, and my ribs slammed against the makeup table. The pain seared through my side until I heaved with deep breaths.

“Ow... ow...” My eyes teared up.

“Jesus, Isabel!” Stepan’s own eyes were wide as he dropped to his knees beside me. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to do that, I—I’m so sorry!”

After he helped me to my feet, I kept my calm—knowing from past experience with my drunken father that an angry reaction only escalated things—I looked up at him and asked quietly, “Will you please leave? I—”

“I said I’m sorry! I don’t know why I did that! You’ve never seen me act like that before, right? It’s just a bad night!” He pulled me hard against his chest, trying to hug me, but it only hurt me more, and I winced.

“Stepan, I don’t think we should continue this conversation right now...”

He looked between my eyes, his pupils moving in jerked motions, and sighed. “Yeah... you’re right. I’m sorry, baby. I’m sorry.”

He left, looking completely sorry for himself. I dropped into my chair, holding my side and trying desperately to keep my tears at bay.

I chose a new top. One that reached down to my midriff and covered the red bruise sprouting across my ribcage. Boris came back in, anger on his face.

“Isabel! I told you ten minutes ago—” He stopped when he saw me frantically wiping my wet cheeks.

“Uh-huh, yeah, sorry, boss, I just had to—”

“I understand, honey,” he said, uncharacteristically. He was looking at me with knowing eyes. “Take your time.”

He left and I pulled in a deep, shuddering breath. I touched up my makeup, smiled at myself in the mirror, and stood up. When I flipped the curtain open and stepped onto the stage, Aleksei was standing right there. He never stood so close to the stage.

He was frowning, his arms were crossed, and his eyes searched mine. I didn’t know if it was because I was late to the stage, or because he’d seen Stepan leaving, looking upset. Maybe he’d even heard the commotion. I gave him a stiff smile—we weren’t friends, after all—and wrapped my fingers around the pole.

“WHY DIDN’T YOU LEAVE HIM THEN ALREADY?” MAXIM ASKED ME. IT looked like hearing my story was perhaps making him feel a little angry. My other sons didn’t grow up with me like he did, so they were less emotional about it. They also knew how their father was, so it was no surprise to them.

“I wish I had...” I shrugged. “But I knew the danger in that. Leaving him would mean leaving my job and packing up my family with absolutely nowhere to go. And, ‘breaking up,’” I said while hooking my fingers, “was not exactly something you could do with someone like Stepan. He made the decisions. I’m sure you boys understand that about him.”

Misha, Dmitry, and Ivan nodded their heads indignantly.

“There was also the fact that...” I paused, sighing.

“Yeah?” Maxim urged me on.

“Something else happened that day.”

A FEW HOURS LATER, I WAS SERVING DRINKS—GETTING MORE HOURS IN without giving actual lap dances—when Boris opened his office door and called me in.

“*Blyad’*,” I cursed under my breath. Was he going to ask me about Stepan? I really hoped he wouldn’t make a big deal of this. As I walked in and closed the door behind me, I started, “Boris, please, can we not—”



“There’s a phone call for you,” he said, looking extremely subdued, possibly worried. “It’s your mother, she says it’s urgent.”

I frowned and approached his desk. He held the phone out for me, then left the office.

“Mama?”

“Isa...” she was sobbing. “It’s Oleg!”

My heart sunk down into my stomach. “What happened to Oleg?”

“The military called...” she hiccupped. “He... he’s gone, *meelaya!* He was killed in combat. *He’s gone!*”

My whole world shrunk. Nothing else mattered anymore. Nothing but my family. How could this happen? How could everything have gone so wrong within the span of a year? How could the military allow an 18-year-old to die? A child, for God’s sake! I was supposed to be the one to save my family! But what was I doing? Shaking my fucking ass for a bunch of horny pigs!

Stepan was right. Aleksei was right. Mama was right. Everyone who had ever told me that what I was doing was self-serving and whorish was right.

My heart felt like it had been wrenched from my body. I heaved with sobs in the chair at the desk, my face buried in my hands. I could see the black streaks of mascara in my palms, but I didn’t care. How could I? Oleg was gone. My sweet, innocent, loyal, responsible little brother! *Why him? Why not me?*

The door opened slowly, and I heard Aleksei’s deep, soothing voice. “Isabel? What’s going on?”

I looked up at him, my eyes blurred with tears. My breath faltered, and I was unable to talk.

The look on Aleksei’s face was that of absolute panic. Something I’d never seen on him before. He stepped inside and I threw myself at him, sobbing loudly against his thick and warm chest, drenching his shirt. His arms immediately wrapped around me tightly, so safe, so comforting, and he pressed his lips against the top of my head without hesitation.

“What is it, Isa? What happened?” With one arm still firmly around my waist, holding me protectively, he pulled away and wiped his thumb across my cheek. His eyes searched mine, filled with such concern and affection that I’d never thought him capable of. “Breathe, Isa, breathe. Tell me,” he said desperately.

My breath rushed out in a long, surging sigh. “Oleg...” my voice trembled. “Oleg is gone.”

“OH, *MALYSHKA*,” STEPAN SAID SOFTLY, RUNNING HIS HAND OVER MY HAIR. We were at his rental house. I was in his arms on the plush couch, and Aleksei stood in the corner of the room, never letting his eyes leave me.

“I am so sorry,” Stepan continued comfortingly. “If only I could make it right... If only there was someone to blame...” His voice grew angry. “I would—”

“There’s no one, Stepan,” I said, my voice filled with depression and my eyes void of any more emotion. “It’s life. It’s war. It’s Russia.”

He tipped my head to look up at him. “My love, this is what I mean when I say it’s a cold world out there. Let me protect you. Let me protect your family.”

I looked between his eyes. “Yes... You’re right, Stepan... I’ll quit the club. Tomorrow.”

He smiled sadly, pouting his bottom lip, and hugged me to his chest. “That’s my girl.”

WHEN THE DAY OF THE FUNERAL CAME, MY MOTHER AND I WAITED FOR Stepan to drive us to the burial grounds where everything had already been arranged by the military. The few family members we had, as well as Oleg’s friends and military comrades, would be there as well, ready to mourn him and join in the wake held after the burial ceremony.

A knock sounded on the door, and we picked up our bags and coats. When I opened the door, it was not Stepan, but Aleksei awaiting us with a somber expression.

“Aleksei?” I asked. My mother had never officially met him, and quick introductions were made. “Where’s Stepan?”

“He had some urgent business to attend to,” Alek said. “He’ll meet us at the cemetery.”

“Okay.” I accepted that. Alek had ditched the limousine for a more modest, black town car today. It was appropriate, and I found myself grateful to him once more, as I had been more and more these past few days since... Well, since Oleg left us.

The military-led ceremony dragged on, longer than anyone mourning their direct family member would truly prefer. I knew it was respectful to pay as much tribute to Oleg as we could, but the pain was almost too much to bear. The salute of three blank rounds fired was too loud for my nerves. The marching band playing the national anthem dragged on too long.

Adding to my anxiety was the fact that I kept looking over my shoulder, waiting for Stepan to arrive. But he didn't.

"He's an important man, *meelaya*," my mother made excuses, too fond of Stepan to find his absence disconcerting. "He never met Oleg. Give him the benefit of the doubt."

Meanwhile, Aleksei stood as a part of the crowd. Not a bodyguard in the background, or at my shoulder watching my every move, but as a mourner, paying his utmost respect to my brother. I couldn't help but appreciate that courtesy toward not only me but my entire family, something I didn't expect from him.

The whole ceremony passed, and Stepan still hadn't shown.

We moved into the social hall where the wake was held, and I stood against the back wall, avoiding the judgmental glances of my aunts and disturbing looks from my uncles. They'd all heard about my most recent profession, and the reputation would stick even though I'd officially quit. Even my cousins stood in clusters and whispered.

When I sighed and swiveled my glance around the room, I saw Aleksei watching me with soft concern in his eyes. I wished he would stop doing that.

I forced myself to close my eyes and picture his face after he kissed me in the hallway, the look of revulsion he wore. I imagined his face that day he sat at the bar, downed his vodka, and then degraded me in my work outfit; or that day when I danced and glanced his way to see him watching me with so much disdain.

Then I pictured Stepan's looks of complete adoration, love, and affection. The way he held me, touched me, and showed me that he cared. When I opened my eyes, I saw him.

Stepan walked in, not caring about the slight gasps and looks of surprise from the rest of my family, and headed straight for me.

"I'm sorry I'm late, my love." He kissed my forehead, then turned to my mother and held both of her hands in his, expressing his sincere condolences. She teared up again and he hugged her, watching me with a soft, sad expression as he did so.

After a respectable amount of time spent with her, I pulled him aside, away from all glances and curious eavesdroppers.

“What took you so long?” I asked.

“I had an issue to deal with,” he said, brushing my hair behind my ear with his other hand in his pocket. I had to admit he looked handsome in his black suit and tie.

“Couldn’t someone else handle it? Couldn’t Aleksei? He’s supposed to be your right-hand man or whatever. Shouldn’t you trust him—”

“Baby, some things, no, some people—clients and associates of the organization—only ever trust the boss. That’s me. I need to be there for certain deals to be finalized.”

“So you’re talking about drugs?” I hissed. “Pushing drugs into the streets of Belarus is more important than me? Your girlfriend? I needed you today!”

He ground his teeth together in irritation. “You have no idea the amount of money that rides on these meetings. You couldn’t even imagine it, Isabel. And look,” he closed his eyes and shook his head, clasping both my hands in his. “You are more than a mere girlfriend to me, my love. Please, you need to understand that. I love you.”

My eyes widened. He’d never said that before. He’d insinuated it at times when we were in bed together, but I felt he’d always been too busy to make it official.

“I... Stepan, I—”

“Listen,” he stepped closer and brushed his lips against my cheek. “I know you’re angry with me right now, so don’t say anything else. I’m going to make it up to you. I’m going to treat you to the best night of your life, okay?”

I cast my eyes down, shaking my head. “Not tonight, Stepan. My heart is too sore.”

“I understand. You let me know when you’re ready.”

He cupped my cheek and kissed me tenderly, so softly and warmly that there was not a doubt in my mind or my heart that this man loved me. I sighed and pressed my cheek against his chest, hugging him tightly.

“Come, let me pay my respects to the rest of your family.” He took my hand in his. “I have to make up for lost time, so to say.” He smiled, and I smiled back, even if sadly.

## CHAPTER 10

# ALEKSEI



I watched Stepan make his way around the room with Isabel on his arm, charming all the family members.

It was the right thing to do. It was his duty, if he wanted to call Isabel his girl. But it made me fume with anger. He was fucking late, the *durak*! He left his girlfriend to mourn her brother all alone, so he could go and seal a fucking deal? It took everything in me not to walk over to her when she stood there alone and lost and put my arm around her shoulders. Hold her close and let her rest her head on my shoulder. Tell her that even though I never met Oleg, he would always be remembered.

I hadn't seen my own brother in a few years. The eulogy at the ceremony made me think of him, even though the idiot was, in fact, still alive. He might've been a foolish, greedy bastard, but I loved him, nonetheless.

Thinking of Stepan's late arrival, I knew he would always choose the bratva over Isabel. He would always choose money and power over her. I just hoped that she knew that and got away as soon as she fucking could. Her life was still salvageable if she somehow found a way to bore him, then maybe he would walk away and leave her be, let her continue her life without consequence.

My hopes for that were doused when I pulled Stepan aside, outside the social hall in a back alley.

"Boss, how did it go?" I asked sternly, hoping he would explain some emergency that went down, that he couldn't get away from.

"Fantastically, Alek!" He grinned from ear to ear, smacking my shoulder with his palm. "We unloaded just about half of our stock to distributors, the next half in a week or two. I'm telling you, if we keep it up with this supplier

—”

“Stepan, Isabel needed you today.”

“What?” He cocked his head.

I looked away, then looked back with narrowed eyes. “When it wasn’t you outside her door to pick her up, she looked devastated.”

I felt rather devastated myself when I saw how disappointed she was to see me at the door.

Stepan waved his hand through the air. “Relax, I’ve already smoothed it over with her. She’s putty in my hands, Alek. Her mom even more so. I’ve just gotta make it up with a proposal, and they’ll be happy for life.”

“A proposal?” My heart began to beat faster, pounding against my chest. And it wasn’t even jealousy this time; it was pure fear for her. She couldn’t get stuck in a marriage with him. It would be her fucking death sentence, or at least the end of the strong woman she was and everything that made her special. She’d have absolutely no power once she was truly under his thumb.

I’d seen him at his worst when it came to women. When it came to *owning* a woman. It wasn’t just dangerous, it was fatal.

“Yeah!” He shrugged, looking proud of his decision. “This woman is...” he rolled his eyes into the back of his head, “she’s the juiciest piece of ass I have ever, ever had in my life. If anyone’s worth marrying, it’s her. Imagine the adorable Russian babies we’ll have, huh? White skin, big brown eyes! She’ll give me a strong heir, Aleksei—”

“That’s it? That’s why you want to marry her? Because of her looks?”

He tipped his head back, chucking. “That’s all a bratva king needs, Aleksei. It seems to me that there’s still a lot you need to learn, even though you’ve been with me for what... ten years? Your heart is too soft. Do me a favor and find yourself someone you fucking *lust* over, someone you want to fuck over and over again, that you never get sick of, then tell me if it fucking matters what her thoughts and opinions are.” He shuddered, like he got chills just thinking of listening to a woman’s thoughts.

I had to bite the inside of my lips just to stop from asking him what the actual fuck his problem was. Why couldn’t *he* find a different woman with a great body who didn’t care for having opinions and dreams? They existed. They were called gold-diggers, and Stepan had enough money to satisfy a woman like that. Why did it have to be Isabel? A fucking great woman who had the potential to be anything she wanted.

I felt stuck; there was nothing I could do to help her. I couldn’t warn her

or tell her to run. At this point, he would search the ends of the earth to find her. She meant that much to him. There was no way out.

“Stepan... marriage isn’t something to take lightly. It’s not some extravagant gift you’d be giving her,” I tried to reason. He drew in a deep breath, finding patience, and gave me a look, allowing me to continue. “It’s something you need to consider as a bratva king. You need a woman who will be fine with being told what to do. Someone who will want to stay at home, where it’s safe, and look after your children. Someone who won’t ask questions when you come home covered in blood.”

“You don’t think Isabel can be that woman?”

“Have you seen her? She’s feisty as fuck, boss.”

He laughed heartily, and I looked around to make sure no other guests thought he was being rude, laughing at a wake.

“Alek, this is something you can learn from me and hopefully take to heart—no matter how feisty a woman can be, she can always be tamed. Isabel is merely a wild horse, begging me to tame her.”

My eyebrows slowly came together. Stepan took that as confusion and continued.

“Look, I know that you can see how beautiful she is. How intelligent she is. Hell, everyone can see it. Except maybe those dumb fuckwits inside that call themselves her family,” he peered over his shoulder. “My point is, where will I find a better woman? The rest are all sluts, money grabbers, scheming fucking whores. But Isabel? She’s only ever fucked me, my man. She is fully, completely mine, Aleksei. And I’m going to make sure she stays that way. I’m going to tame that horse and train her to be my wife, my fucking bratva queen. I’ll be the envy of every single one of my rivals and my associates, and their wives too. You’ll see. She’ll be perfect.”

I looked down, my jaw muscles popping. That was the end of it. Stepan would never, ever let her go. “Sure, Stepan. If you say so.”

It was later, when most guests had left, including Stepan—he was going back into the city—when I found Isabel sitting outside alone on a garden bench, looking up at the stars. I looked around and saw only her mother chatting with whom I believed to be her aunt, so I approached and sat down next to Isabel.

“Do you think he’s up there, Alek?” she asked without looking my way. I looked up. “Like a little shining light, way up above the clouds, looking down and watching us?”



I took a moment to reply. “I guess I do. Whenever I want to ask my father’s advice or feel his presence, I look up to the sky.”

She smiled sadly and cast her eyes down. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know you’d lost him.”

“It was a while ago now; I was still young.”

Her eyes were questioning. I didn’t like to reveal too much of my past, of myself, but to Isabel it was easy. “I was about seventeen. My brother was fifteen. I guess you could say I’d matured enough to grieve my father but my brother, Gregori... he struggled. I almost lost him as well.”

“Oh, God, Alek, I’m sorry,” Isabel shook her head.

“Don’t be... He’s just fine. Lives in Saint Petersburg.”

She nodded and a moment of silence passed. Then, she whispered, “I let Oleg down, Aleksei.”

My eyebrows drew together, and I put my arm around her shoulders. “Hey... Of course you didn’t. I don’t know all that much about your life, but I know that you were working really hard, doing something you didn’t want to do so that your brother could finish school, right?”

“Well, yeah...”

“And he did. Tell me, was your father around much?”

“Too much,” she said glumly. “When he left us, it was the first time we ever felt safe.”

I nodded. “Well, that explains it then. Your brother clearly wanted to be a better man. He saw you working hard to provide, and he decided to work hard to protect. Different method, but the same drive.”

Her body trembled as her tears sprang up again. I didn’t shush her or tell her to stop crying, that it would be okay. I knew it wasn’t what she needed. She had to get this out, to spend this time mourning Oleg.

“You and he were one and the same, and I’m pretty sure that he looks down with the utmost respect for you and how hard you’re working.”

“Well, I’m not anymore...”

“But you will. You said you wanted to start college?”

“Yeah.” Finally, she smiled, turning her face up to me, as though she was surprised that I knew that.

“What would you like to study?” I took my arm away from her shoulders, clasping my hands between my thighs that lay wide, my right thigh warm against her left.

She sniffed. “Business. Accounting. Everything that will help me be my

own boss, you know?”

“Oh yeah,” I replied, staring into the distance. “I know.”

I knew all too well—that it would be near impossible once Stepan had her under his thumb. She’d be a boss, sure, but only ever of a household. A social circle, maybe, of bratva wives. My heart sank, knowing her future but being unable to warn her. Things would only get worse if she tried to run. If she refused his proposal, he would find a way to force her. Blackmail her. Lock her in a goddamn tower, if that was what it took. He made that clear to me today.

“I don’t know, maybe I’ll start my own retail brand! Like, to provide better quality workers clothes! Do you know how often my mom had to buy my father new factory clothing? They ripped at the seams nearly every month. That would be a good business.”

“Sounds like it would do very well.” I smiled. She amazed me. Maybe she would find a way to get this kind of business off the ground, if Stepan gave her enough slack. It could be possible... maybe.

She sighed deeply and set her hand on my thigh. “Thanks, Alek. I needed that.”

“Of course. Now, um... you think your mama is ready to get home?”

She squeezed my thigh. “Yes. I think we all need some rest.”

## CHAPTER II

# ISABEL



I stood with my elbows in my hands, hugging my body against the cold breeze.

It was the day after the funeral, and I'd asked Stepan to bring me to the graveyard where Oleg's body had officially been buried. I stared at his gravestone for ages, before dropping onto my knees on the fresh grass they'd laid.

"Oh, Oleg... I'm sorry," I said softly. Stepan was waiting for me, leaning against his limo, staring down at his phone. "I wish things were different. I wish our life wasn't so... fucking... hard!" I chuckled, wiping a tear and knowing he would have mockingly teased me for my profanity. "Seriously," I touched the ground over his grave, spreading my fingers as though caressing him. "I wish you did drop out of school and get a job like you suggested before I went to that club. Because then you'd be alive. Yeah, maybe you'd be miserable like Papa and Mama, but you'd be alive. You would be here at my side, telling me that if we tried hard enough, we could make it out of this city together."

I sighed, brushing the tips of my fingers over the blades of grass like I used to do to his unruly hair. "I'm going to do that. For you. I'm going to make sure I live a life worthy of both of our strong souls. You'll see."

I gave him a small smile, then heard footsteps behind me.

"Isabel?" Stepan pulled me up from my knees and hugged me. "It's okay. Everything will be okay. Just believe it." He pulled away and held my face between his hands, dropping his head to look into my eyes.

"I know," I answered, feeling this sense of positivity and hope. Like Oleg was behind me, pushing me to reach for my dreams.

“Good. Because I promise, I’m going to look after you forever and always. Now that you’re away from that club, I finally feel like you’re truly mine.” He brushed my hair away, looking over my face with such love. “And I want you to come back to Moscow with me.”

“Wait, what?” I frowned. *This was never mentioned before.*

He shrugged with a happy smile. “My business here in Belarus is at a point now where I can leave someone else in charge. I miss my home, where I grew up. My Koslov Castle. And I want you there with me.”

“No, Stepan,” I shook my head. “I’m not leaving my mother. Not now!”

“You’ll be able to see her often enough. There’s a Koslov private jet, in case you didn’t know,” he said playfully, wrapping his hand around my hip. “Or we can move her to Moscow, whatever you want. You can have it.”

I shook my head, feeling confused. “Stepan, this is a lot!”

“Yes, *malyshka*, it is. I’m asking you to be my wife.”

My heart stopped beating, creating a pain in my chest. “What?” I pulled away, my eyes widening in shock.

I knew that it was what my mother had been pushing for, what all of this actually came down to—getting a man like Stepan and *keeping* him, in the form of marriage. But this was happening too fast. The incident in the dressing room the other day came back to me, and a nagging feeling about it reminded me of my father.

No, I couldn’t think like that. I had just told Oleg that I would reach my dreams, for him. And how the hell was I going to do that if I didn’t marry a man like Stepan, who could send me to college and help me build myself up? If I said no to him, I would be back at square one. No job at the club or worse—a job at the club for life.

While my thoughts swirled and my breathing paused, Stepan shook my arms lightly.

“Please, will you marry me, Isabel? I’m begging you. You are the woman I’ve always imagined having by my side, for life. You are clever and strong enough to handle the kind of life that I live. I know—I know, it will sometimes take me away from you. But truly,” he lifted my chin to look at his charming smile, “once you have a few kids to fill that big heart of yours, you won’t care too much about my absence, huh?”

It was so, so much. Children? I was still trying to get myself on my own two feet, not ready to get children on their feet!

“I... I had no clue that this was your expectation,” I said, my eyebrows

frowning deeply in confusion. “You’re the kind of man who frequents strip clubs, who walks around with bullet wounds like they’re papercuts! What kind of life will I lead? Being your wife?”

“You’ll get everything you want, *kukla!*” He threw his hands out, looking so excited and happy. “Anything at all! You will be my queen, darling.”

Well, being a queen did sound good. I didn’t want to be poor and trapped in a loveless marriage like my mother. I wanted more than to be the princess she wanted me to be. I wanted the crown.

Stepan made me believe, and I’d have opportunities I’d never had before. I’d be able to put my mom up in a good home, allowing her to retire. I could get my degree, start my business, earn my own money and pride.

*Pride.*

Would getting there by riding on the coattails of my husband bring me pride? I just didn’t know if that’s what I wanted. I needed more time.

“Stepan, honey... Please can I think about this? It would change a lot in my life... Especially if it would mean I’d have to move to Moscow.”

“Of course, baby,” he said, brushing my hair behind my ear and looking softly into my eyes. “Take your time. In fact, I do need to go to Moscow tonight, so you’ll have a few days. Okay? Does that sound good?”

I smiled, slipping my arms around his waist. “Perfect.”

WHEN STEPAN DROPPED ME AT HOME, I WALKED IN TO FIND MY MOTHER somberly cooking dinner. Even if Oleg had been gone in the military for months before leaving us, the place still felt quieter. I squeezed her shoulders, kissed her cheek, and asked her to sit down.

“Mama... Stepan asked me to marry him today.”

She gasped, her fingers flying to her cheeks. “Oh, Isabel! This is such great news!” She burst into tears, squeezing my hands.

“I haven’t answered him yet.”

“What? Why not?”

I shook my head, staring down at the table and unable to meet her eyes as I admitted, “I don’t know if I love him.”

“That’s of no consequence here, *meelaya.*”

“What?” I looked up. “How could you say that?”

She smiled sadly, at least giving me the recognition of the heartache of the situation. “He will bring you security. Financial security and other security—look how he protects you with a full-time bodyguard at your side!”

I guiltily thought of how I’d taken that particular “privilege” too far. Even at the wake. We’d shared such a touching conversation. It was beyond professional boundaries.

“Remember all the nights we struggled because your father drank our money away? Remember a year ago, when we were on the brink of homelessness? Remember when I had to send Oleg to school in broken shoes?” She teared up again. “His poor toes were black by the time he’d walked home!”

I quickly shifted closer and hugged her with one arm, resting my cheek on her head as she cried.

“Yes, Mama... of course I remember.”

She sniffed, straightening up and composing herself. “I didn’t need love from your father. I needed security, to feel safe and protected, the way Stepan makes you feel. All the love I needed came from you two beautiful children.” She smiled. “And the sooner you marry Stepan, the sooner you’ll have children of your own and feel that love. You’ll see... It will be worth it.”

I swallowed, taking a moment to prepare for what was coming next because it was a big factor in this decision.

“Mama, Stepan is a Koslov man. Do you know what that means? He’s—”

“Of course I know, Isabel,” she said, looking serious now and casting her eyes down as she sat up straight. “But we don’t speak of it.” As if to show her knowledge of the *bratva* world, she explained, “He’s wealthy but never speaks of his job; he has men with guns around him all the time. He even had a gunshot wound—I grew up downtown, I know what a gunshot wound looks like. But as long as you’re married to the boss, you’re the most protected woman in the whole city.”

My mouth hung open slightly, my heart sinking. That was my last playing card, my last reason to “get out,” and she’d just stepped on it.

“He is your—no, *our*—savior. He found you when we needed him most, and it would be completely selfish of you to turn him away, Isabel. Not to mention, foolish. This is the chance of a lifetime and if you don’t take it... well... I don’t know *where* we’ll be next year. Perhaps worse than being homeless.”

I sunk my face into my hands and drew it back up, pulling at my cheeks

with the motion. “You’re right, Mama. I know you’re right. I guess I just needed to hear it.”

THAT NIGHT, I COULDN’T SLEEP. I’D BEEN SPENDING ALL DAY THINKING OF Stepan and the reasons why I should or shouldn’t accept his proposal.

But I’d been avoiding the most glaringly obvious reason: that I loved Aleksei Chernoff. I did. There was no denying that pull in my stomach when he walked into the room or the warm, happy feeling I felt whenever he comforted me.

We shared this emotional connection that I’d never felt with Stepan. I always felt that Alek understood me, with just one look into each other’s eyes. He seemed to share in my grief of losing a close family member and of having to live a life he hadn’t actually chosen. He knew me even though he hardly knew anything about me, and it was the same for me. I could see who he was as a person, and I loved him for it.

When I thought of him, I felt not only my mind calm but my body melt. There was this carnal pull I felt toward him, a deep need to feel his skin on my fingertips, his lips pressed to mine, and his hard body against me. It wasn’t just that sexually charged feeling I would get with Stepan, it was so much more. It was like my soul yearned to be connected with his, through mind... and body.

I had to get some kind of closure before I made my decision. I couldn’t just ignore that part of me, that passionate, burning part of me that cried out to be given attention. It would only fester if I didn’t give it some kind of chance to be freed.

I quietly stepped out of bed and slipped my clothes on over my negligee, then carried my boots until I was out in the hall, pulling the door shut with a quiet, though heart-stopping, *click*. I put my boots on, pulled my hood over my head, and stuffed my hands deep into my pockets.

The rental house was only a few blocks away and Stepan was in Moscow. Aleksei would be alone tonight, staying behind to watch over me, as was his job. I knew he would be pissed if he knew I was walking alone, at night, in the downtown area. But it wasn’t like I could call him; that would kind of defeat the purpose of this impromptu decision. Besides, it might’ve even been



more dangerous to stop at a phone booth this time of the night, where someone might spot me waiting alone under the dim glow of the street light.

When he opened the door, he wore only sweatpants and a look of confused anger on his face. I saw his torso completely naked for the first time and gulped. It was mountainous, tattoos swirling on one bulging pec, and he had a scar or two across his ribs. When I pulled the hood off my head, Alek's eyes widened, and he looked behind me.

"What the fuck, Isabel?" He quickly pulled me inside and closed the door, locking it. I noticed him lay his handgun down on the entry table, it was obviously concealed behind the door when he opened it. "How did you get here?"

"Aleksei... I..." I felt out of breath, and not necessarily because of the walk over here. My heart was beating so fast in my chest that I couldn't think straight. "I needed to see you."

"See me?" he asked as though that was the craziest thought. "Why? What happened?"

"Well..." I pulled off my thick jacket, and he took it to hang at the door. "Stepan proposed to me today."

"Oh..." His large chest deflated, and he turned away toward the lounge area. The whole room was still dark, so he flicked on the standing lamp as he passed it. "I didn't think he would do it so soon."

## CHAPTER 12

# ISABEL



I followed him, stepping into the room behind him. “You knew he would?”

He dropped onto the couch, running his hands through his hair. The yellow light of the dim lamp bulb cast shadows across his body. *God!* I knew he was sexy but to see him like this—half-naked, muscles jumping with frustration, his skin so warm and touchable, still with sleep creases—it was driving me insane with desire.

“Yeah,” he replied tiredly, wiping his face. He frowned and cocked his head to the side curiously. “Where did he propose? When?”

I sat down on the coffee table in front of him, wanting to be close. My knees were between his and my hands resting on my thighs. He leaned back against the couch, clearly trying to keep some distance between us. “This afternoon, while we were visiting Oleg’s gravesite.”

His eyes fluttered closed, and he shook his head. “Fuck me... The inconsiderate prick. I know, I know I shouldn’t speak of my boss like this but —”

“It’s okay. I understand.” I shook my head, knowing that he meant well and didn’t always agree with Stepan’s ways of doing things.

“Isabel, you deserved more than that... Jesus.”

I shrugged. “It was sweet, if you put it into context... but, the *proposal* isn’t why I’m here.”

He was silent for a moment, flicking his eyes between mine. “No?”

“No. It’s my answer. I didn’t give him one.”

As he tried to make sense of things, he kept a close eye on me, staying reclined on the couch to avoid getting too close because if he leaned forward

a little, our faces would be just inches apart.

“Isabel... Don’t make me draw it out of you. Why are you here? What do you want?” His voice was harsh, but it only made him sexier to me. It showed he cared.

I stood up abruptly, scrunching my long hair between my fingers as I walked away and considered my answer. Eventually, when I could find no alternative way to say it, I gave him the blunt answer.

I spun around to face him again. “You, Aleksei! I want you!”

He closed his eyes and dropped his head, then stood up and walked to where I stood. “Isabel, we’ve been through this. It’s too dangerous!”

Angry tears prickled my eyes. *Fuck his rejection! Fuck his logic!* I couldn’t take it anymore!

“Aleksei, I need to feel you!” I tried to explain. “If only this once! It could be my last chance.”

He looked at me earnestly, breathing heavily as he contemplated it for a second. Then, he shook his head once and stepped right into me. “Fuck it.”

I threw my arms around his neck, and he immediately wrapped his around my waist, picking me up to his height as our mouths connected. Our kiss was forceful at first, then slid into a hot and heavy caress of our lips against each other. I moaned lightly into his mouth.

He turned us around and dropped back down onto the couch so I was straddling his lap. I pressed my body against his as we continued our kiss. His lips were soft and gently against mine, and I felt an overwhelming sense of comfort and security. I felt at peace in his presence, like nothing else mattered in this moment. His touch sent sparks of electricity through my body, and I knew instinctively that I belonged to him.

“Oh, God, Isabel... This is so reckless,” he moaned, his fingers squeezing my legs. I paused and looked at him with my hands cupping his cheeks, and he gave me a heated stare. “In the best fucking way possible.”

His words made me lose my mind, and I ground down against him, swiping my tongue right into his mouth and showing him just how badly I wanted this. His hands traveled to my ass and shoved me down hard against him, making me cry out.

“Oh! Fuck, Alek!”

I began to feel utterly frustrated with the clothing keeping me from feeling his skin against mine, so I quickly stood up and undid the button of my jeans.

Alek watched me with burning eyes, I recognized that fire I always thought was hate or anger but realized was actually raw and true passion. I slipped the jeans down my thighs, kicking my shoes off along with them. Alek reached forward to slide his hands down the length of my bare legs and tug the jeans off where they caught around my ankles. I leaned against his shoulders and laughed lightly at the domesticity of it.

I then pulled my sweater over my head and was left in my negligee and panties—very obviously my sleepwear. Alek licked his lips and smiled.

“You got out of bed for me?”

I nodded, smiling excitedly and climbing onto him again. My hands quickly pressed against his chest, my favorite part of him, then swept up over his shoulders and down his biceps. Fuck, this man was so hard and soft at the same time, it baffled my brain completely.

His hands and eyes caressed my body equally. It seemed he couldn't get enough of just touching me—his hands sliding from my back to my ribs, to my stomach and to my thighs, back around to my ass, where he swiped his fingers down between my butt cheeks, just enough to brush against my damp panties.

I gasped with need and rocked forward against him, but Alek slowly shook his head.

“Baby... you've been dancing for me for so long. All I've ever wanted to do was touch you. And not for me, but for you.”

I frowned, not entirely sure what he meant by that.

His eyes grew dark, and he spoke in a deep tone, “All I want, Isa, baby, is to make you come. Again, and again, and again.”

My cheeks heated up, and I drew in quick breaths. I had no time to answer because Alek gripped me by my waist and tipped me back, so I lay down on the wide coffee table, then he planted his face between my breasts.

“Ah!” I laughed with surprise, then held his head and dragged my nails through his hair. My thighs were still hanging over his as he sat forward with his hands holding my hips, and his face in my chest. His nose nudged at my breasts, and he pulled his cheek along the inner side before nipping at my nipple with his teeth, through the silk of the negligee.

“Oh!” I giggled, loving how he looked up at me with such a devilish smile—with my nipple still lightly clamped between his teeth. He released, then pushed down and sucked more than just my nipple into his mouth, soaking the material, swirling his hot tongue in circles.

“Alek!” I complained and began tugging at the lacey seam to let my wanting breasts free.

His hands quickly grabbed mine and set them above my head, hanging off the opposite side of the table.

“I told you,” he growled. “It’s my turn to touch, and your turn to be teased.”

*Oh my God...* I fucking loved it.

He used his tongue to lick my chest, moving down, hooking under the lace, until he popped my bare nipple into his mouth.

“Oh! Yes...” I arched my back, pushing up for more.

Alek’s hand released my wrists and slid down my arms, tickling me. Being with Alek was playful and loving and freeing. I found myself laughing and smiling so much more often than with Stepan—this kind of passion was different than what I expected. I thought it would be harsh and dangerous, like last time, but it was teasing and fun.

His hands cupped my tits and his thumbs freed both of my nipples, staring down at them longingly.

“Fuck. This is a fucking dream, isn’t it?”

He didn’t wait for an answer and quickly brushed the rough pads of his thumbs over my nipples before swirling his tongue around each one, taking turns, nipping at them with his teeth.

I didn’t know it was possible to spend so much foreplay time on just my breasts. It seemed I still had a lot to learn.

Finally, I felt his fingers drag down my sides and lift the little dress just high enough to see my panties. He stopped and smiled.

“You know what I liked to think about whenever I watched you dance?”

“What?” I asked in a breathy voice—feeling a weird relief to hear that he really did enjoy watching me.

“I just wanted to walk up to you and do this.”

With his palm facing me, he slipped my panties to the side and very lightly slid his middle finger along my soaking wet lips, not digging inside, just skimming along the wetness.

A shiver trembled through his body, as well as mine. “All I wanted was to give you everything you deserved,” he said softly, almost like he was talking to himself.

After a few more teasing strokes, his finger slowly slipped inside of me, pushing deeper, and deeper. It was sensual, not desperate. My body tensed

with the teasing pleasure. He pushed all the way into me until I felt his knuckles lightly touch my panties still held to the side.

At this point, I was heaving with desire. He watched my face as he curled his finger inside of me, creating this sudden blooming effect in my pelvis.

“Oh!” I gasped.

He curled it again, and I realized that this man knew exactly where that famous G-spot was, because *Christ*, he kept stroking that finger against that specific spot slowly, torturously. Suddenly, without warning, he lifted his thumb and pressed it to my clit.

“Oh, shit!” I moaned, throwing my arm over my eyes and pulling my legs up further to push down against his hand, needing him to keep going. I heard his dark chuckle—he was enjoying watching me squirm.

He only stopped to slide a second finger into me, then continued his internal caresses while his thumb rubbed in little circles against my clit with growing intensity. It wasn't long before I was thrashing around on the table, coiling my body and trembling with a mind-altering orgasm.

Aleksei bit his lip with a wide smile, and for the first time I noticed a dimple in his left cheek. He'd never smiled like that before.

Once I'd calmed from my elation, I panted with exhaustion and looked at him in wonder. “Wow...”

“That was just what I wanted to do at the club, in the shadows,” Alek explained, hooking his fingers into the sides of my panties. “This...” He pulled my panties off, lifting my legs high up to slip them off my feet, then placed my feet on his knees, and pushed my thighs open. “This is what I've been wanting to do if I ever got you alone.”

I lay there, feeling the most self-conscious I had ever felt in my entire life while he stared down at my naked pussy.

His breath came out shakily. He lowered his head, and he licked me, really slowly, right through the length of my drenched slit. His hands cupped the bottom of my thighs and he squeezed tightly, pulling me closer like he couldn't help it—touching me in ways I'd always craved, especially when I danced for him on the pole, but that he'd always denied.

His mouth closed around my clit, and he pressed his tongue against it, swirled it and sucked it until I thought I would come again—only to stop, give me that devilish smile again, and begin to lap at my clit. His hands released my thighs and slid up against my ass cheeks to my hips, brushing over my stomach, all the while teasing my swollen nub with only his tongue.

It flapped against my clit, picking up speed, until my jaw hung all the way open, and I lost my ability to breathe.

Just when the pleasure reached its peak, he brought his hand back around, under my leg, and slid his fingers into me so easily.

One deep stroke and I exploded.

“Aaah! Fuck! Alek!”

I shook and I writhed and I sat up, pulling forward and lifting my knees with delectable spasms coursing through my body and deep satisfaction burning inside me.

Alek sat back, his large and hardened shaft obvious as it pressed against the fabric of his sweatpants at his thigh, begging to be let out. He wasn't making that move yet, though. He was watching me with this look on his face. It was like a combination of the looks I'd seen from him before—fire, desire, care, respect—with another glint in his eye that I'd never truly seen before: love.

It was clear as day.

I felt like telling him that I loved him, that we should run away together, and at least I would die having loved him, right?

But instead, I decided to avoid the dramatics and give myself to him. Rather save the radical ideas for when I could actually think straight. So, I pulled my negligee over my head.

Big mistake.

The look on Alek's face went from adoration to deep, seething anger. I realized that his eyes were glued to the big purple, yellowing bruise on my side.

Shit. Shit!

“What the fuck is that?” he asked, pointing.

I quickly put my negligee back on and pressed my thighs together. “Nothing, Alek. It's really nothing.”

His fists clenched at his sides, his eyes blazed, and the muscles along his jaw moved back and forth constantly. A certain fear grew inside of me. This was a dangerous man, even more so than my father, than Stepan. He was bigger than either of them and could do a lot more damage.

I wasn't sure how to act or what to say to subdue the situation, so I found myself staring at him with fear in my eyes and stumbling an excuse. “It only ever happened that one time. I think he was high, I don't know, but he apologized so many times and really made up for it since—”



“He’ll kill you,” Aleksei said, his voice suddenly cool and impassive.

“What?” I asked, not expecting the calm response.

“He will kill you, if given the chance, Isabel.”

He stood up and walked away, his fists still clenched, but it was clear that he had the anger under control. When he turned around his eyes were closed, and he was shaking his head.

“We can’t give him that chance,” he said with finality.

I frowned in question, feeling so low after such a magical high.

“What do you mean?”

He breathed deeply, looking like he was seriously struggling to come to this decision. Finally, his eyes opened—the fire gone, replaced with that emotionless expression he always wore as a bodyguard. “You need to go home, now.”

I felt that pain in my chest, ripping my heart apart. “Alek... Can we not end the night like this, please? I know what I need to do—”

“Then do it. Because I won’t survive it if he kills you because of me. Because I lost control and took something that was his. We’ve already gone way too far. You need to go.” He closed his eyes. “I’m taking you home.”

I stood up, giving him a pleading look, my tears hot against my cheeks as I held out my hands toward him, trying to make him understand. “But Aleksei, I’m *in love* with you!”

## CHAPTER 13

# ALEKSEI



I looked at her devastated face and felt an overwhelming wave of emotion course through my body. I rushed forward and crushed my lips to hers, holding her face against mine as I kissed her with a burning intensity. When I eventually broke the kiss, I kept my forehead against her with my eyes closed.

“God, Isabel, I love you so much, too.” My eyes opened and I swiped her tears from her cheeks. “And that’s why we can’t do this—” I looked at the coffee table, “again, because I need you to stay alive, okay?”

She pushed away angrily. “I’m alive, Aleksei! I’m here! I know Stepan is a ruthless bratva king but you’re the one who’s hurting me! A bruise is nothing compared to how you’re always ripping my heart in two! Why do you keep rejecting me?”

Her words sliced right through my heart. She didn’t understand. She couldn’t possibly. She hadn’t seen enough of what Stepan was capable of doing.

I tried to explain. “Because, Isabel! What we’re doing is more dangerous than you can even comprehend!” I ran my fingers through my hair.

“Comprehend? Alek, are you serious? You know me! I’m not some quivering, sheltered princess!” She began angrily pulling her panties back on.

God, I hated that. I knew I was the one to put a stop to it, but all I wanted was to rip them back off and claim her as mine. She’d gotten me so insatiably hard. Her incredible God-given tits were still so visible in that little night dress. And the silk was darkened with dampness around her hard nipples, making me think of sucking her spectacular nubs again. And her soft, white legs—fuck, the lustful thoughts were plaguing my mind. I couldn’t believe

what I was doing right now, refusing her like this.

“Yeah, I know that—”

“So tell me!” she cut me off, throwing her hip out angrily, but it only made every part of her body move in such delectable ways. “Tell me what it is that has you so fucking scared! Yeah, I get it, he shoved me and bruised my ribs, but that can’t be the only reason you’re so terrified of touching me!”

I swallowed deeply and sighed, trying to control not only my emotions but my raging desire as well.

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll tell you. But please, put your clothes back on so I can concentrate.”

She tipped her head to the side and said in a quipped, terse voice, “Only if you do as well, Alek.”

I looked down and came to the realization that yes, not only was the top half of my body naked but my raging erection was still there, still tenting my sweatpants. I lifted my eyes to her, putting every last ounce of restraint I had into saying, “Fair enough.”

Once dressed we sat down—her on the couch and me drawing a chair closer. I leaned forward with my elbows on my knees and put my hands together.

“I, um... Well, I had no real choice but to become a part of the bratva.”

“Well, that’s been clear,” she said. I gave her a look and she lifted her hands, implying that she would let me talk.

“I grew up in Moscow. I had a good childhood. My mother was caring. My father was a great, kind man. And I had—have—a little brother, whom I love. Things were great. My papa had this little wooden cabin out in the mountains, and he’d take us there over weekends and teach us to fish, hunt, shoot. How to survive, really,” I shrugged. “But, ah, as I mentioned before, he died when we were teenagers.”

Isabel nodded gently.

“I became the man of the household. There was enough money for me to finish my last year of school and then of course I started working at a manufacturing plant, helping my mama to provide for us. But Gregori... he struggled. He started using drugs and hanging out with the wrong crowds. I did everything I could. I found him out on the street in the middle of the night and brought him home. I took him out to the cabin to get clean and hunt and try to help him remember the good times, but he just wasn’t interested anymore.

“I knew he was peddling drugs for the bratva. It became clear; he was standing on specific street corners every day, telling me he had to go meet with people. I followed him, I saw the exchanges and the bratva men he met up with. When I asked him about it, he argued that he was bringing money into the household, that he was doing what needed to be done, but I could see it in his eyes. He was already hooked on the stuff.

“So, one night, I went out to look for him. I knew it was a pointless task to try and convince him to give it all up, but I figured at least I could get him home if he was passed out somewhere. I couldn’t find him. He didn’t come home for days, and that wasn’t like him.”

“So you approached the bratva yourself?” Isabel nodded.

“Yes. I entered the little corner shop I knew was one of their fronts that Gregori reported to and asked them where he was. They laughed at me. Said that his fate was sealed. But the way they looked at the back door of the shop... I knew he was there somewhere. So, I knocked the two guys out, and I let myself in.”

“You just knocked them out?” Isabel’s eyebrows lifted.

“Like I said, my papa taught me survival skills.”

She scoffed lightly. “A little under exaggeration there, but okay... What did you find behind the door?”

“My brother. Beaten to a pulp.”

She watched me quietly, absorbed by the story.

“The guy watching over him turned to me with this huge gun, and I just walked up to him and took him by the throat before he could even say a word. I disarmed him by ripping the gun from his hand and throwing him to the floor. Just as I kicked him, I heard a whistle behind me. Like, a slow, impressed kind of whistle. I turned to see Mr. Koslov, Stepan’s father.”

Isabel sat up a little straighter.

“I asked him what his plan was for my brother, and he told me that Gregori had not only used up a substantial amount of their dope and owed them a lot of money but that he’d also given bratva intel to some rival dealers looking for more drugs in return.”

“Oh, shit...” Her eyes were locked on mine, her fingers slowly touching her lip.

“Yeah. I already knew it was a death sentence. But Mr. Koslov looked at me and said: ‘You not only found my den, but you walked in here and took out three of my soldiers.’ And so he offered me a deal. Instead of killing my

brother, I could pay off his debt as a bratva soldier myself.”

“They just let him go?”

“No. I had to make sure he left the city so he wouldn’t be a threat anymore. I sent him to live in Saint Petersburg with an uncle of ours. Of course he wasn’t happy with it, but it was that or his life.”

“Okay, so... When did Stepan come in?”

“I worked for his father for two years, rising pretty quickly through the ranks. I was a sharpshooter, I was stealthy, and I was quiet. He seemed to trust me.” I shrugged. “Then Stepan turned eighteen, and his father assigned me to be his right-hand man, mentor, bodyguard...”

“Babysitter.”

I chuckled. “Yes. Anyway, to get to the point, I saw Stepan grow into the man he is today. He was reckless, spoiled, and he was given the throne much too soon, only a few years later. It went to his head and he... he liked to use his power in very disturbing ways.”

Isabel frowned. “Disturbing ways?”

I looked at her, taking a moment before answering. “He’d laugh while beating a man to death; he would practice his shooting skills on traitors’ bodies, as in, shoot each limb, see how many shots he could get in before the guy died. He did the same with knives.”

“What the fuck?”

“He enjoyed the power that came with inducing pain. Prostitutes would leave his room black and blue.”

Isabel grew silent, and her eyes grew wide.

“I spoke with his father about it but he shrugged, saying it was just the Koslov in him. Stepan had been seeing a young woman regularly—you could say she was his girlfriend. But once he started his violent ways in the bedroom she tried to run.”

I made sure to narrow my eyes and show Isabel how serious the situation was.

“She made it to a motel three hours out of the city. He ah... he found her. I wasn’t there that night. But... I never saw her again.”

She swallowed, shifting uncomfortably on the couch.

“There was another girlfriend, Isabel, he found her in bed with a bratva soldier. He shot the guy in the head, while she still sat on top of him. She ran into the bathroom, but he was faster and followed her in there. I tried to stop him, but he pointed his gun at me until I backed up and he closed the door.

There was this darkness in his eyes... a blackness. Like rage had possessed him.”

Isabel began tearing up but tried to hide it and act unaffected.

“Look, I won’t give you too many details, but he spent a long while with her in that bathroom... until I couldn’t hear any more screams.”

Isabel stood up from the couch and shook her hands, like she was trying to loosen her limbs, trying to shake the shock and rage out of her body. I was silent; I figured I’d said enough for her to grasp the gravity of the situation. When she turned back around, her tears were rolling down her cheeks.

“So... so why didn’t you warn me?”

I sat back with a sigh. “He hasn’t killed every girlfriend he’s had, Isabel. If he got bored, he merely moved along. I hoped he’d do the same with you—no offense, of course—but he’s seemingly hooked on you,” I said glumly.

Her breath staggered and she wiped her tears. I stood up to hold her shoulders and look into her eyes.

“And this is why I am so terrified of touching you. Not because I would get a shot to the head, but because he would kill you, Isabel. And I can’t live with that. I can’t lose you.”

She shook her head angrily. “Don’t say that! It only makes it hurt more!”

“But I need you to understand, Isa, baby!” I pleaded, bending at the knees to force her to look into my eyes. “I want you to refuse his proposal. I want it more than anything! I want to take you right this very second and run away with you! Have a real life together somewhere else!”

“So why can’t we do that?” she cried.

“Because not only will he find us, but he’ll find your mama. He’ll find my brother. Your friend, Essie?”

“Essa,” she sniffed.

“He’ll use them; he’ll hurt them. He’ll use every single person you’ve ever loved against you. But if we stop this right now, if we keep our heads down, we can avoid that. We can live a life where at least we’ll be around each other, right?”

She pulled in a deep, shuddering breath, struggling to come to terms with it all.

“I promise you, I will always be there to protect you. But I can only love you from behind the bratva mask,” I said in a soft, though stern voice. “From the shadows. That’s the only way we’ll be able to stay alive.”

She sighed, beginning to reluctantly nod her head. I nodded, my eyes

jumping between hers to make sure that she'd grasped everything I'd said.

“Okay. Get your things, and tomorrow, you tell him yes, okay?”

She pulled in another deep breath and pushed it out in a sigh, her voice so very small as she replied, “Okay.”



## CHAPTER 14

# ALEKSEI



“Just as I expected, *priyatel'*, she said yes!”

Stepan smirked proudly, and I smiled as genuinely as I possibly could. “How could she say no? To a king like you?” I said it in a teasing, flattering way, though of course, my words held a much darker meaning. “She’d be crazy.”

I watched him inspect the product that had recently been packed for distribution. He opened a small bag, tasted it on the tip of his finger, then nodded with a shrug. “Seems like the same great shit as usual. You see? I told you we could trust this guy.” He popped a fresh little bag into his coat pocket, then picked up his handgun that lay on the table and holstered it in his coat. “Boys, send it out.”

A group of Koslov bratva soldiers who waited patiently at the side of the room—a new location, this time an old abandoned house—quickly gathered up the product into separate larger bags, to be delivered to certain distributors around the city.

I was still staying at Stepan’s rental house near Isabel’s apartment, though he insisted that very soon we would all be relocating back to Moscow. It was his decision, I knew that much, but I wondered how Isabel felt about it. Would we move her mother with us?

Just the thought of her had me on edge when I was with Stepan. Because *bozhe moi*... I stepped so close to the edge. I almost let myself fall, right into her arms, right into her fucking velvet sanctuary that got so goddamn wet when I... I shuddered at the thought, grinding my teeth together. It sounded crass to so desperately want to have been inside her, but in my mind, I thought of it in the best, most fucking beautiful way.

During that moment, I wasn't feeling proud about getting her on her back, or disappointed that I didn't get the chance to be inside her. All I could think about was hearing her moan my name, about making her feel the best she'd ever felt in her entire life. If I had pushed into her, my only thought would have been about whether or not she liked it, wanted more, wanted me.

Fuck, I was lost for this woman. But not stupidly lost; I still had the mind to get myself under control and, essentially, save both of our lives.

I was careful; before I ever knew she was going to come around, I had already checked for hidden cameras. There were none. It was my job—I had some experience in the Koslov security team back in Moscow—to know how to look for cameras, bugs, recording devices hidden in lampshades, coats, handbags, and the like. Besides, by that point, the product had been moved to its new location, so I knew there was no reason for anyone to be watching that house.

Isa was intelligent about it as well. As she'd said, she knew what she had to do. And she'd now done it—accepted Stepan—and understood the position she was in. Because once he'd seen her at that club, there was no going back.

But I'd had enough dwelling on what could or couldn't be. I just wanted to focus on the future and try to be around as much as possible so that I could keep an eye on Stepan and make sure he didn't lay a violent hand on her again. It was a painful realization that I couldn't have complete control over the situation, and that they would be spending a lot of the time alone. All I could do was my best to try and make things work.

It wasn't long after Isabel had said yes to Stepan that he began his arrangements to return to his home city. For him, that didn't mean booking flights and ending rental agreements, it meant hiring the right man to represent him here in Belarus, to continue the drug business he'd so lovingly set up. Dima, the supplier, was more than happy to stretch out his business too, of course. He would meet Stepan in Moscow to discuss new ventures there as well.

Of course, Stepan already had many business ventures in Moscow—certain ones my brother got himself involved in long ago—but he was so happy with this new shit, he was eager to invite Dima out to Moscow as well.

I STOOD AT THE SIDE OF THE LARGE ENTERTAINMENT LOUNGE IN THE KOSLOV Moscow mansion, watching the guests chime with laughter and murmur with conversation.

Stepan was hosting his and Isabel's engagement party this evening.

We'd made the move back to the big, sparkling city a few weeks ago with Isabel at Stepan's side and a huge, blinding diamond on her finger. She seemed to be embracing the lifestyle, at least. There were some perks to the bratva way of living.

We'd recently flown her mama over from Belarus to help plan and prepare for the party, and she was constantly alight with pride and awe. I'd heard the discussions and done the chauffeuring when Isabel took her mom out shopping to buy dresses, shoes, and jewelry for the evening. Even though I kept my distance, it was clear that her mom didn't want to accept all the "free" gifts, but once Isabel convinced her that the party would be a prestigious one, with a lot of Stepan's business associates, she accepted and allowed herself to feel beautiful—for the first time, I wondered—in a floor-length black evening gown, with sleeves that came to a point over the backs of her hands and accentuated the few rings she donned.

Isabel, on the other hand, just about took my breath away when she descended the stairs in an elegant emerald-green dress. It complimented the hues of her milky skin and dark eyes. Brought in at the waist by a string of crystals that loosely resembled a rosary, the dress accentuated her lustrous hips and cut off at her knees and elbows. The neckline was low, though not in a promiscuous way but more of a respectable, sophisticated cut.

Stepan walked with her on his arm all evening, showing her off, introducing her to everyone that had anything to do with the bratva. There were other bratva families there too, the Sorokins for example, who'd always been allies of Stepan's father.

Another was Dima himself. I'd met him of course, back in Belarus, right before Stepan was shot in the shoulder during a measly misunderstanding that caused Stepan's men to start shooting and Dima's to retaliate. It all turned out well, obviously, making Stepan trust him more. A man who was too eager to impress wasn't to be trusted—Stepan insisted—but one who could afford to lose you was one worth keeping around.

*Right. Solid business logic.*

I just didn't feel great about Dima. He was around my age, built well enough, and had tattoos up his neck, certainly a bratva standard of man. He

held an air of guarded apprehensiveness. It was exactly what Stepan trusted about him, that I did not. I felt he had too many secrets behind those calculating eyes.

He seemed well-behaved tonight, smiling charmingly and greeting Isabel with just a little too much flirtation in his touchy hands. Stepan didn't mind. Of course, I did.

I couldn't help but think that, even if Isabel were to get out of this now, everyone who was anyone in Russia already knew her face. This was a downhill situation, a snowball already set in motion, which could only ever end in disaster.

"You've been awfully scarce this evening," Isabel murmured, sidling up to me with her champagne flute between her delicate fingers. She stood shoulder to shoulder with me, facing the crowd and smiling or nodding at anyone who looked her way.

"That's my job, is it not?" I said calmly. Just because we couldn't physically be together didn't mean we couldn't be friendly, or at least, cordial.

"Actually no," she chuckled. "You promised you'd always be around."

I tried to hide my smirk. "Oh I am, but as I also mentioned, I'd be in the shadows." I turned to look at her finally, making eye contact before looking down at her glass and raising a brow. I knew she wasn't a fan of drinking.

She tipped her head to the side in a show of self-respect. "No one even notices that this is still my first glass, I just chuck a little into the potted plants whenever I pass them."

I looked ahead again, nodding as I spoke under my breath, just enough for her to hear. "That's my girl."

She smiled and spotted her mother sitting alone on a lush antique loveseat to the side of the room, looking hazy with happiness, resting her own glass of champagne on her knee.

"I'll see you in the shadows, Alek," Isabel said, then walked over to her mother, joined her, and seemed to have a warm, loving conversation.

Later in the evening, once Isabel had gotten her tired mom to bed and disappeared to "shower and slip into bed"—God, why did I have to imagine it—Stepan jerked his head toward his office, signaling me to join as he led a few associates there for nightcaps and cigars.

The home office was substantially large, but cozy in that manly, dark-stained-wood way. Since it wasn't even Stepan's father who'd built this

house but his grandfather—it held a lot of antique style, with only minor renovations done over the years. The family was a traditional one.

“Join me, *priyateli!* Cigars are on the table, drinks here at the bar cart,” Stepan said as he began tipping whiskey into a cluster of crystal tumblers. I took my place in the corner of the room. In these casual situations, Stepan didn’t expect me to stand to the side like a statue with my hand on my gun, but rather kick back in an armchair and just keep an eye out.

One of his VIPs of the evening was Yevgeniy Sorokin, who was around Stepan’s age of late 30s and who’d recently taken over the throne of the Sorokin bratva organization while his father, the previous “king,” was practically on his deathbed.

The men were equal in status, but their difference in power lay in their territory, their men, their businesses, and even their stature in the community. At least tonight, they were friendly.

“Yev, my friend,” Stepan approached him while other associates ambled around the room, lighting cigars and beginning their own conversations, “let’s catch up, get to know one another better! We are practically brothers now, aren’t we?” He laughed, too loudly. The whiskey had gotten to him.

“Aleksi Chernoff,” I heard beside me. It was Dima, he stood next to my chair, his back straight and his hands in his pants pockets. I didn’t stand up. Some might consider the importance of eye-level, of being physically higher than the other, but in this situation, it would have been “respectful” toward him to stand up, so I remained seated—holding my own power by showing an air of calm.

“Dima, how are you?”

“Great, thank you. Now let’s cut the chit chat.”

I smiled. “Please do.”

“I know you don’t trust me. I can see that. But,” he turned to face me, dropping his head to look down at me while I tipped mine to the side, looking up entirely unperturbed. “I can also see that Stepan holds a lot of respect for you and values your opinions.”

I kept watching him without replying.

“So, I’d like to spend some more time with you as well, become friendly, and give you a chance to see that I mean business.”

I looked away, nodding while my words opposed, “Unfortunately for you, I don’t enjoy the same kinds of... indulgences... that Stepan does.”

“Oh?” He lifted an eyebrow. “What would you enjoy then?”

At this point, I did stand up. But it was no show of respect. I lifted until my nose was higher than his, and buttoned my suit jacket as I said, “I am not your client, Dima. Keep Stepan happy, and I’ll be happy.”

He nodded slowly, watching me carefully. “Noted.”

I smiled, patted his shoulder, and walked away.

*I don't trust that man for shit.*

## CHAPTER 15



# ISABEL



I left my mama to wander the gardens of Stepan’s massive estate while I walked through the lobby with him and out the front doors. I knew he was rich, but this place showed *old* money. It showed not only how long his family had been in the *bratva* business or how he’d developed such a reputation within all communities in every city, but also how deep his violent roots were.

It was ingrained in him to control—to collect power and to enjoy it at his leisure. I always kept in mind the stories that Alek had told me that night about Stepan’s youthful past, but I tried not to let them scare me. I had an abusive father, I dealt with unwanted touches and attention for a whole year at that club, I could handle myself. All I needed to do was keep a close eye on what Stepan was up to and on when his moods changed.

We stepped into the limousine on our way to lunch with an old friend of his, an associate of Stepan’s father who he liked to keep in contact with. Apparently, it was foolish to come into the throne and disregard the elders within the community. They held the people’s respect, and he needed those kinds of men in his corner.

Thankfully, he’d hired a full-time chauffeur, so Aleksei was freed up to follow us and guard us, scope out the restaurant before we entered, talk with the *maître d’*, and make sure we were well taken care of everywhere we went.

This meant he joined us in the back of the limo, although seated far ahead where he could talk with the driver through the small privacy hatch.

“So, my love, how have you been enjoying the Moscow life?” Stepan asked me, pulling me to his side with his arm around my shoulders.

I gave a light sigh, looking at him with my dangling crystal earrings

tickling my neck. Due to the more casual lunch setting, I had my long hair twisted into a knot at the back of my neck and wore a plain cream-colored jumpsuit with a wide neckline. The understated outfit allowed for a little bit of extravagant jewelry.

“It’s wonderful, Stepan. But do we really need to send my mother back to Belarus after the wedding? The house is so big, we could have three entire families living here without knowing it!”

He broke eye contact and pulled his arm away to merely place it on my thigh instead. “We’ve discussed this, *malyshka*, it’s never healthy to have a parent living with you. Imagine the power play? Remember how she would order you around that small apartment? Do you really think she’s going to just let you run a big house like this without giving you constant unwanted advice and opinions?”

“Yes, but we can set her up in her own section of the house, can’t we? She’d have her own lounge and kitchen to use, she won’t need much—”

“No, no, no,” Stepan said insistently, though calmly. He then looked at me seriously. “My love, you know the business I’m in. You know how Aleksei must always be one step behind us, behind you, at all times?”

My eyes darted to Alek, who was keeping his gaze averted.

“Yes.”

“I would need to hire your mama a guard of her own. I would need to accommodate her as though she’s royalty. I know she’s your mother and you love her but she’s not mine, and I’m not prepared to have her living in my house, where my business takes place, where she can hear too much, where she can be in danger of being taken and tortured for information!”

I was quiet, hearing his words as they rose in volume.

“Don’t you see?” he continued. “She would be in danger here. I can focus on protecting my wife, but not her family as well. Now, of course, we’ll be setting her up in a house on the safer side of her city in Belarus, she’ll be able to retire and live her life as though she has absolutely no ties to the *bratva* at all. Don’t you think that would be better for her?”

I pressed my lips together, not entirely convinced. I was glad about setting her up for retirement in a safe area, but I still would have preferred to have her closer to me. I’d lived with her my whole life, until only a few weeks ago. I was no mama’s girl, but we were close, and I loved her. While sometimes judgmental, her advice was usually sound.

“Yes, Stepan... I suppose it would be safer to have her away from the

business.”

“There we are,” he kissed my temple. “I’m glad you understand.”

“While we’re on the topic of safety and bodyguards…” I said slowly, and noticed Aleksei’s eyes shift to mine, “I was wondering what the situation would look like once I start college? What will the process be? Surely you won’t have a bodyguard enrolled as well just to sit with me in every class?”

Alek looked away again, satisfied with my line of questioning.

“Oh, darling…” Stepan physically turned his body to me this time, frowning. “I told you this before, when you become a bratva wife, you’re taking on a job of its own. You won’t be going to college.”

“What?” I snapped. “But I told you it was one of my life goals! I—”

“Calm down, Isabel. You need to be cool and collected for this lunch meeting.”

“Fuck that! If I’m going to be a woman of stature in this city, I need some kind of degree behind my name! Something to help me start up a business and have the credentials to back it up!”

“You’ll have enough opportunities with Koslov as your last name, I assure you.” Stepan now looked out of the window. “We can discuss whatever your little business ideas might be in the future, but right now, your focus should be on the wedding and on taking your place in the household. You need to assert your dominance over the housekeeper, the chefs, the maids, even the guards.” He took my hand and squeezed it. “You’re going to be the Koslov queen, my darling. Start acting like it.”

I pulled in a deep breath and squeezed my jaw shut. I wouldn’t argue with Stepan over it anymore; not right now. That was one of the rules I’d set for myself—drop the subject if it becomes heated. But I would definitely bring this up again. I wasn’t going to let Stepan control my entire life. If I had this “power” he kept referring to, I was going to use it to my advantage.

I looked toward Alek, who seemed to be looking down at the floor, frowning. His jaw popped in that way it did when he was angry or just thinking really hard. I looked away. While we obviously had a deep connection, a true love between us, I couldn’t indulge in it. I couldn’t let myself see his emotions and be affected by them.

LATER THAT EVENING, I WAS READING ALONE IN OUR BEDROOM SUITE. IT WAS quite beautiful, embellished with plush furniture and small crystal pendant lights, cordoned into sections of the dressing room and full en-suite bathroom; the wide bedroom with big windows showing a view of the gardens; and the lounge area a step down from the bed, where I now sat curled up on the large sofa.

The door burst open, and Stepan smiled widely. “My love! There you are. Look at you sitting there all beautiful... If only you were naked, right? You’d look like one of those old French paintings with the chubby women all draped over the—”

“Stepan!” I accosted him, closing my book. “Firstly, I am not chubby. I am curvy. And secondly, what’s going on with you? Are you drunk?”

He nodded slowly, dropping down next to me and giving me a shrug. “It’s what whiskey does, right? But it only makes this more fun—” he slid his hands around me and pulled me closer to kiss me. I pushed back slightly, not wanting to upset him, but I wasn’t in the mood, not at all. He was still attractive to me; it wasn’t exactly off-putting to have his charming smile and baby-blue eyes aimed at me. But the slur in his words and the smell wafting from him was definitely off-putting.

“Stepan, I don’t feel like doing this now. Maybe tomorrow morning, alright? When you’ve slept the whiskey off and maybe gotten rid of that smokey stink...” I turned away, looking for fresh air.

He stilled and dropped his hands. “Come on, you’re my fiancé... Can’t a man get a little loving from his one and only woman?”

“When a man smells clean, yeah,” I said impassively.

“Isabel, *malyshka*,” he pleaded, pulling on my arms. “You look so good tonight... please... I’ll make you feel like it, we’ll start like we did that first time, yes?” He bounced his eyebrows enticingly.

But I was not enticed. I hated the stench of whiskey and the reek of cigarettes on his fingers. It reminded me of my father and those nights I wanted to leave in my past.

I stood up, hoping to walk to the bathroom and ready myself for bed. “No, Stepan, not tonight.”

His grip on my arms tightened, and I was caught standing with him holding me in place. “Isabel, be reasonable.”

“Reasonable?” I asked him. “About what?”

“About a man’s needs!” He stood up and threw his hands out. “They

don't just go away because you *don't feel like it*," he sneered the words as though they had no validity at all.

"What about *my* needs?" I asked.

"What?" He didn't understand the question.

"My need to get some sleep! Or my need to feel like you'll listen to me when I say no! How about my need to feel safe around you?"

That awoke something inside him. He narrowed his eyes and stepped closer to me. "Is this about that *one* time I pushed you and you tripped on your own goddamn stripper heels?" He gripped my upper arm and pulled me to him, pushing his face down to be nose to nose with me. "Because trust me, darling, as the bratva king, you are no safer with anyone else than you are with me!"

I fumed, breathing deeply even though his breath repulsed me. "Then let me go, bratva king, because you *are* hurting me."

He started laughing, looking at the ceiling. "This?" He pulled on my arm, hurting me even more, and locked his gaze on mine. "This is fuck-all compared to what my enemies would do to you if they got their hands on you."

"Stepan," I tried to speak calmly. "I'm with you right now. I'm in a house full of guards. I'm safe, remember? So can we just let this go, please?"

"No!" He was officially pissed. He'd crossed over from the fun kind of drunk to the blackout, aggressive phase. "You need to understand that this—" he jerked my arm, and I stumbled to the side, "this is nothing!" He let go and shoved me against the shoulders. I stumbled back but held my balance, glaring at him. "This is just some playful fun between lovers. A passionate tumble."

He shoved me again, and this time I fell. "Stepan!" I called out in anger and reached out to stop my fall. I knocked over a vase of flowers from the side table next to the couch, staggering and finally falling back with my hand landing on the broken glass.

"Shit!" I cursed, then lifted my hand. Blood dripped from the small but deep cuts. I could feel stinging sensations on my butt, as well, since the glass was all over the carpet where I fell. "Stepan!" I cried out again, looking up at him. "Is this what you call safe?" I wanted to yell louder and scream and fight back, but my mother was in the house. Though far away, on the main floor below us, I still didn't want to alert her.

It was as though cold water had crashed over Stepan's head when he saw

the blood, and he sobered immediately. “Isabel...” he started. “I... I’m sorry.”

I felt myself tear up. Not because of him—he couldn’t hurt my feelings—but because of the situation that triggered childhood fears and the deep stinging pains in my hand. Blood seeped and threatened to stain the Persian carpet, so I cupped my hands together and tried to stand up.

“Here,” Stepan reached forward to help me. He held my arm where he’d bruised it, and I flinched. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he quickly said, and took my elbow instead.

I stood up and looked around my body; there were definitely a few little cuts on my ass cheek as well—I could see the spots of blood on my soft pink sweatpants. Stepan led me around the mess and followed me to the bathroom. I wanted to tell him to leave me the hell alone. I wanted to shove him onto the glass as well. I wanted to kick him in the chest and send him flying over the furniture.

But I didn’t. I had to keep my cool, collect my thoughts, and use my intelligence to figure out the best way of handling this kind of situation because it would definitely happen again.

I put my hand under the water and hissed when it hit the cuts. “Get me the tweezers, over there,” I said to Stepan, and he quickly found them.

“Here, let me, please?” he asked, his eyes now turned from demonic to babyish and pleading. I swallowed my anger, then nodded and held my hand out. He put his palm gently under my hand and lifted it to the light, to begin pulling out little shards of glass.

“I, um... I’ll need your help here, as well.” I turned my side and let him see the small spots of blood on my pants.

He sighed, closing his eyes. “Of course, baby.”

I didn’t know how deep his remorse went, but he was definitely regretting his actions. He looked more guilty than the previous time, and it gave me the smallest bit of hope that maybe his love for me would prevent further nights like this.

*Maybe.*

He helped me to remove my clothing carefully and made quick work of pulling out the few shards in my butt cheek. He turned the shower on and held his hand under the water until it was the right temperature, then guided me inside.

As I let the water flow over me, washing the blood off but trying to keep

the cuts out of the water, Stepan pulled his shirt off. I looked over at him, his muscular body was rippling as he reached over the sink and began to brush his teeth. His eyes didn't leave me the entire time. He was doing it for me. He was trying. He then pulled his pants off and approached the shower.

"May I?"

I nodded, watching him step in and only just graze my naked body as he stood under the fall of the water and washed himself. Only once he was fully clean, no longer smelling of booze and smoke, did he touch me.

I let him... and it was loving. It was soft, slow, and good. He was making up for what he'd done, and not because he was horny but because he was giving me the attention and love I needed after a scene like that.

Later, I lay awake with a bandage wrapped around my palm and fingered it gently, thinking about how I'm still so young—only 21. How can my life be determined already? How can there be no way out of this life I've been forced into? It started with one lap dance, to put food on the table and allow my brother to finish his schooling.

My brother, who isn't even here anymore.

Women my age are out there still figuring out what they want to do with their lives. Here I am, already knowing what I want to do, but being told that I can't do it. That college and degrees and proper business education are just not on the cards for me. Look at what happens if I refuse a mere kiss.

Aleksei is right; if I refuse to marry Stepan, if I plan to run away and find a better life, Stepan will find me. And then, he will kill me.

"AND IN THE NEXT FEW WEEKS... I REALIZED I WAS PREGNANT."

"Oh, shit," Dmitry said, transfixed by my story.

"Hey," Misha swatted his arm. "That's me she's talking about. Right?" He looked at me and I chuckled.

"Yes."

"Sorry," Misha added, "I don't mean to try and romanticize your experiences with our father, I just meant—"

"I know, Misha," I said lightly and smiled. "I have no regrets that I had children with Stepan."

"So..." Ivan began with a sad tone to his voice. "That meant even if you

wanted to run away, you had to stay and marry Stepan because you were carrying his son?"

I nodded. "Exactly. I mean, if it was only me leaving him, that's one thing. But if I left and took not only his right-hand man with me but his first Koslov heir?" I shook my head. "There would be no hiding from him."



## CHAPTER 16

# ALEKSEI



I hardened my heart, even more so than when I saw my brother bloodied and beaten, and allowed my life to be changed forever by it. My life couldn't have gone a different way, because this was the life chosen for me by destiny.

Fucking cruel, barbaric, cutthroat destiny.

I remembered something my father used to say, perhaps only once or twice when he felt cheated by his working-class status, but also when he was teaching us to be survivalists in the mountains. He'd said, "Life truly is ruled by the survival of the fittest. But don't be fooled, money and power are more fitting for destiny than physicality."

I didn't truly understand it at the time, but these days it was becoming more and more clear to me. He was telling us that throwing a good punch will get you nowhere if the man you're hitting has enough power. Put me and Stepan in a room, I could kill him. Easily. But all that would do is put a huge target on my back, a target that would be searched for by every man in Russia with a gun looking for the reward money that the next Koslov king would put on my head.

It was hopeless. Useless, in fact. My strength felt *useless* to me when Stepan was around, always choosing my fate for me.

Not only that, but my body felt useless every time I looked at Isabel. I wasn't allowed to feel that heat build in me. I wasn't allowed to let my hands move where they wanted to, or let my lips kiss the skin I so desperately craved.

And the day she called me into that little dressing room, I realized I was facing the most difficult moment of my life. Nothing Stepan or Gregori had

ever done cost me as much restraint as I had to use that day. But it wasn't my dick screaming for freedom, it was my heart.

That morning, I stood in the dining area of the large kitchen, eating some quick breakfast when Isabel poked her head around the corner and asked, "Alek, are you free to accompany my mama and me to my dress fitting today? It's right in the city center."

"Yeah, sure."

Stepan walked in and gave me a look. "I thought you'd join me for the meeting with Dima at the warehouse today, but I guess it's better you watch over Isabel out there in the city."

She grinned, then disappeared to get herself ready.

"You're spreading me thin, boss," I said, taking a seat across from him at the table. He frowned in question with a piece of toast in his mouth. "Isabel's bodyguard, your right-hand man, two full-time jobs, really."

He rolled his eyes and sat forward, speaking while chewing. "I get it, she needs to go out for certain *appointments*," he said the word as though he saw them as playdates, "but she could have gotten the seamstress to come to the house. Seriously, you need to stop taking her out so damn much. Keep her at the house where the guards can watch over her, then you'll be more available to join me at these meetings, where you're supposed to be."

"Hey, you're the one who put me on her," I said, holding my hands up innocently.

"Yeah, because I don't trust any of the other guys around her. At least I know you won't make a move or try some shit with her."

I certainly wouldn't. This time he was right about that.

He grabbed his last piece of toast and bit into it as he left the room, saying in a teasing tone, "Enjoy your dress shopping, Aleksei!"

I readied the black Lincoln town car Isabel always preferred I use and picked up the two Belarusian beauties at the front door. The seamstress shop was in the city, one of the most sought-after dress designers in the country, I overheard them saying to one another.

It was only when I pulled up in front of the shop that I realized she was talking about her fucking *wedding* dress. I assumed it was just another evening dress for the multiple events Stepan took her to, always demanding she look her absolute best with a new designer piece to make the other wives—and their husbands—jealous. She was his arm candy after all. I decided to stay outside the shop and wait in the car. This wasn't the kind of shop bratva

men visited.

But, of course, within about 30 minutes I saw who I later realized was the seamstress standing in the doorway beckoning me inside. I obliged, wondering if everything was okay. She was smiling, though, so I figured Isabel was fine.

She stood on a platform wearing a wedding dress, swishing it around her feet. Her hair was twisted on top of her head so her shoulders and neck were completely exposed, and my eyes slid down her smooth, bare back.

*Yebena met!* I groaned inwardly.

Isabel was more than just fine... she was the most angelic woman I'd ever seen.

I quickly ripped my eyes away from her, already feeling that knot in my stomach tighten. When she heard me clear my throat, she turned around.

The seamstress quickly said, "I'm going to help your mother look around in the back," and disappeared behind a curtain.

We were left alone.

"Um," I shoved my hands into my pants pockets and looked across the room, at anything but her. "You needed me?"

"Yes," she said, turning back to look into the mirror. "I need a man's opinion. My mama is off looking for another dress because she thinks this one is too plain. She wants to see more lace and frills, but I love the simplicity of it... and I guess I figured I'd ask you if you thought it was boring like she does?" She laughed lightly, as though the question was so innocent.

But surely, she must have known this would affect me?

I sighed, swallowing my damn sensitivity and bracing myself for heartbreak, then looked right at her. The answer was in her eyes: they were piercing my soul, pleading for some kind of authentic emotion. She wasn't trying to torture me, she was lost in the chaotic planning of a wedding that should be the most romantic time in her life, but of course, it wasn't. I was sure that she was excited about the whole event, but maybe needed to feel truly seen, truly loved, even if only for a minute.

I let my eyes drop down and caress her. The dress truly was without any frills, and it emanated class and sophistication. It was long sleeved with the bottom spreading out around the platform at her feet. The soft, silky material draped across her chest and fell over her shoulders, curving low at the bottom of her back. The dress hugged her body naturally, sitting lightly against her

skin.

It was perfect. Not sexualized, yet stunningly sexily. Not boring, but rather enticing and alluring. Oh, God, the jealousy was eating me from the inside.

If she hadn't already stolen my heart, she would have right then. She looked gorgeous—yes—fucking exquisite and sexy as hell; but what really got to me was the fact that the dress was white. It held so much more meaning than any sexy red or black dress ever could. The white dress, trailing across the floor behind her meant she was giving herself away, and it wouldn't be to me.

It should have been to me. She should have been mine, in another world, one where Stepan didn't exist, where my brother didn't fuck up, where I found Isabel and gave her the kind of life she deserved. Maybe I wouldn't have been able to buy her a dress quite like this one, but she would have looked equally stunning to me. Because she would have been mine to hold, to touch, to kiss.

I didn't quite know what to say without giving my true feelings away. She knew what I felt for her, but I didn't want her to know just how much this was affecting me.

“Um... Yes,” I nodded, trying my best to speak platonically, though I was sure my eyes were giving me away. “The simplicity works for you... Because of the contrast of your dark hair and eyes... they kind of steal the show, you know?” I chuckled. “So the dress doesn't need much... embellishment.”

I hoped I used the right words and looked straight into her eyes to make sure she understood the gist of what I was saying. I figured she did because suddenly she was blushing, the rosiness of her cheeks obvious against that creamy skin of hers. She quickly pulled her eyes away from mine—giving me some satisfaction that she, too, struggled to handle this particular moment—and nodded, looking down to touch the material again.

“Thank you, Alek...”

“Sure,” I said, then quickly got the hell out of there.

I HAD THE EVENING OFF THAT NIGHT, AND IT COULDN'T HAVE COME AT A

better time. I couldn't take much more. Seeing her, seeing Stepan, seeing them plan their wedding and pretending not to care, I couldn't take much more of any of it.

That whole wedding dress situation was the limit of my control.

I approached a strip club, one known as Koslov territory. Stepan had had the intelligence to stay away since announcing his engagement and upcoming wedding, but he was a frequent visitor before we went to Belarus. Needless to say, they knew me there.

My suit jacket and tie were discarded on the back seat of the car and my white sleeves rolled up my arms. I had the first few buttons of my shirt popped open. Truly, I was just trying to let loose, but I knew it allowed my chest tattoos to peek out, and the girls liked that.

I was welcomed with a smile and pat on the back from the usually grumpy-as-fuck bouncer, whose face melted right back to intolerance when someone from the line complained about my quick entrance.

Inside, the lights were dim and the music slow, but the bass was booming through my chest. I walked in and stopped to scope the place—a bodyguard reflex—but also to decide how I was going to spend my night. In front of me was the stage, with two wings spreading out into the club, a pole at each end. Dancers were sliding down the poles, some spreading out across the stage with their legs in the air. Their movements were slow, the music enticing, and the room filled with smoke. It all screamed sex.

I scanned the room, the bar to the left was busy with customers, a boisterous bachelor's party, a few lone men and a woman who I noticed was watching me over her shoulder. She was blonde, and leaning over the bar counter so her ass was pushed out naturally. In a more corporate type of outfit, she seemed to be a customer, though still interested in spending time with me.

I looked away. There was no appeal.

To the left was the VIP section, behind a wall—what I knew to be a darker, more salacious room than this one. I walked toward it, once again given a surprised welcome by the doorman.

“Aleksei! It's been so long, what, more than a year, huh?” He came forward to hug me and pat my back. He wasn't just an employee, he was an actual *bratva* soldier posted here to make sure only Koslov *bratva* men and associates entered this room.

“Nikolai,” I said warmly. The two of us had spent time together as

Stepan's personal guard a few years ago. "It's good to see you."

"I don't see Stepan. Is he on his way?"

"It's my night off, *priyatel*'. I'm here to, let's say, blow off some steam." I gave him a light smile and winked.

He laughed and grabbed my shoulder, just about pushing me into the room. "Go enjoy yourself, Alek. You deserve it. Most of all of us!" he called out as I walked through the doors and into the room.

*That's better*, I thought. The room was quieter, the same slow music booming but without all of the "outsiders." The bar counter was practically empty, there were dark booths in each corner with only two groups of men clearly talking business and having a good time, more controlled and low-key than the hooligans out there. These women, clad in lingerie, were either sitting with them, chatting sweetly, or dancing very slowly in their laps. No one was losing their minds or staring at them with creepy murderous eyes. Right in the middle of the room was one pole on a platform, with a red-haired dancer in a white-lace bodice, minding her own business as she made slow movements with her hips.

I approached the bar and nodded at the barman. "Vodka, double."

He mutely obeyed, pouring the ice-cold liquor and setting the glass before me. He waited with the bottle in his hand—he was well trained—because I downed the first double and slid my glass forward for the next.

Just then, right on cue, the club manager approached me. "Aleksei Chernoff!" he said happily, his hands held out. We shared another hug. Like I said, Stepan frequented this place, well, *frequently*.

"Hello, Sasha, you're looking well."

"And you're looking hungry," he said, tipping his head to the side with a compact smile. "I'll have a few ladies walk through here. I know you... you don't like the thirsty ones." I gave him a slow smile. I'd forgotten the service in this place was impeccable. "So they won't know to look for you. You just give the right girl a nod, alright?"

"Thank you, Sash. I'll see if my interests are piqued." I winked at him too and he laughed heartily, grabbing both my shoulders with a squeeze before heading out the door again. I wasn't even sure if I wanted a woman in my lap. Maybe watching this classier type on the pole would be enough to satisfy my need for distraction.

I took a seat in a booth and placed my ankle on my knee, sipping my second drink slowly. I watched as a few dancers and even waitresses came in

and out, merely glancing around as they walked through the room and out the private door behind the bar or stopped to fill their trays with drinks.

I felt bored. Perhaps that wasn't the right word. I felt tense and uninterested. My mind kept taking me back to that wedding dress, to Isabel walking down the house corridor in her silky shorts and camisole pajamas—that I shouldn't have seen, I was merely looking for Stepan at the time—and to her smooth milky legs over my thighs as I licked her pussy until she cried out my name.

*Fuck.* I wished I could get her out of my system. I wished I was stupid enough to pull her into an unused guest room at the house and just do it, pin her down, make her gasp for air as I invaded her body with my dick that always seemed to be rock hard for her and no one else.

But I wasn't a foolish man. So I was here. Looking for an outlet to ease that unsatisfied tension. As these thoughts flew into my mind and I tried to chase them out, a woman walked into the room.

*Oh, God, finally.*

She had long black hair and thick lashes over her dark brown eyes. Her skin was white, pure, and from here looked entirely smooth to the touch. She wore high-waisted black panties over her curved hips and a black lace bra—without the padding—just the way I liked it. Natural, comfortable, intimate. She fucking dripped with the resemblance of Isabel.

I lifted my chin and caught her eye, then jerked my head to the side, signaling for her to approach. As she did so, she didn't smile or flick her hair. She sat down next to me and hung one leg over the other, angling her body toward me.

“Hey, handsome.”

“Hello,” was all I said, looking into her eyes more so than her body. I was analyzing her, comparing her to the woman who had a tight grasp around my heart. The likeness was just enough; she would do.

“Not up for conversation, huh?” she said, lifting her chin. “Well, Sash told me that there's a *very* important man in here, sitting alone, looking for a little company. Is that you?”

I looked around at each of the two groups of men, seeing no other man sitting alone in the room, then looked at her and shrugged.

“Looks like it.”

“Okay,” she nodded, looking away.

*Fuck me.* Her cavalier attitude was so much like Isabel's.



“So what’ll it be? I’m getting that you’re not looking for that type of service,” she gestured discreetly toward the women who sat beside the men and talked flirtatiously, with their hands on the men’s thighs or arms. “So just a dance then?”

I nodded once, taking my leg off the other and pushing them wide open. She smiled and stood up.

She started with slow hip movements, running her hands up her sides and letting her tits fall with a bounce as she touched her neck. She pulled her hair up into her hands and turned around, showing me her back and her rounded ass.

I saw Isabel. Actively and decidedly, I pictured her between my legs, just like that one time she danced for me so many months ago. She rolled her hips as she turned back around, letting her hair fall over her chest. She straddled me, her knees wide, her hands lightly touching my shoulders. As she let her ass bounce low between my knees, she leaned forward and brushed her cheek against the stubble of my jaw, allowing me access to her neck. I brushed her hair back over her shoulder, opening up her neck and finding myself running my nose up her white skin.

I didn’t smell Isabel, but the intimacy of the action was exactly what I looked for with Isabel. So it worked, and I felt myself harden.

The dancer lifted up and pushed forward, allowing me a little nuzzle between her plump, natural tits. I breathed in and bit my lip, feeling that overflow of erotic need rush through my body. When she moved slowly back down, she ground herself against my hard-on. I sighed and dropped my head back.

Her mouth approached my ear and she whispered, “You can touch me, you know.”

*What a fucking flashback.*

I slowly shook my head as she backed up to grind down against me again, her hands around my neck. Her eyes were on mine, studying me.

“You’re thinking of someone else, aren’t you?”

Her words weren’t accusing or angered, just curious. I clenched my jaw and looked down, before lifting only my eyes and nodding.

“Someone you can’t have?”

A slight, sarcastic smile grew on my lips. “You’re good at your job.”

“Of course I am, honey,” she said, rolling her hips and smiling. She repositioned herself to sit on my right thigh with her arm around my

shoulders, pausing the dance for a moment. “This big boy over here,” she lifted her knee up my crotch, just brushing against my hard-on that was caught down my thigh, “tells me that you really need some kind of release.” She looked away, brushing her fingers through her hair thoughtfully. “And since you’re not only a bratva man, but the bratva king’s guard,” she must have heard from Nikolai at the door, “you have access to a little room in the back there.” She pointed to the door behind the bar. “Where we can be alone.”

I shook my head. “I’m not looking to fuck, sweetheart.”

“Even though I’d be game for that,” she said, biting her lip, “what I mean is you could pull him out while I dance for you, and touch yourself, instead of me.”

I paused, lifting my eyebrow. *Well shit; that could work.* “Okay then.”

In the backroom, I dropped down onto the wide sofa and leaned far back while she closed the door. I was finally able to push my hand into my pants and pull my dick up straight, under my belt.

She understood exactly what to do. Her body flowed between my knees, rolling her ass up and shaking it a little to get the cheeks wobbling.

*Oh fuck. Isabel used to do that.*

Anytime she turned around to face me, she would allow her long hair to drape across her face, turning to the side so her identity was entirely blurred with that of Isabel’s. My breathing deepened, and I rubbed my dick slowly over my pants.

She gradually stepped her knees onto the sofa and straddled me, while giving me space to do my thing. She then dropped her head back until I couldn’t see her face, arching and rolling her body. Slowly, she removed her bra and I saw her thick, rounded tits with her dark, tight, and hardened nipples.

“Fuck,” I couldn’t help but breathe out.

She sat back up but dropped her head down and watched as she caressed her own tits, pinching the nipples and pulling at them playfully while her hair brushed over them, covering her face.

*Jesus, Isabel... yes...*

I unfastened my belt, unzipped my pants, and slowly, with my hand cupping my balls, pulled it all out. My pants only needed to be pulled down a little, but finally, I had my dick reaching for the ceiling and my balls resting on the seam of my underwear.

She didn't say anything—she knew my fantasy would be spoiled by hearing another woman's voice—but allowed herself a little peek and bit her lip again, sighing deeply.

*Oh, God, Isa, baby...*

I knew Isabel had never seen it. We'd stopped just before I'd pulled my dick out for her, but imagining that would be her reaction, that she might bite her lip in need and be unable to remove her eyes from the sight of it, got me fucking excited.

I wrapped my fingers around the girth of my shaft and slowly pulled up, squeezed the head lightly, then pulled back down, splaying my fingers across my balls.

I heard her small gasp. It didn't break the spell; I still heard and saw Isabel watching me.

She continued to dance, letting her body move sensually and slowly, but when she saw me picking up the speed of my movements, she held onto the back of the sofa behind me with one hand, pulled her hair slightly forward to just blur her identity enough, and began to bounce.

It was as though Isabel was sitting in my lap, on my dick, and her sweet pale body was bouncing on it, fucking me. I squeezed my forefinger and thumb up my shaft, finding a rhythm, and felt my balls tense up.

“Oh, fuck... yes, baby...” I groaned, watching her tits bounce and her mouth fall open.

I climaxed, lifting my hips, shoving my spurting dick up into my hand, and saw her breathing deeply, moving her hips gradually as though she needed release as well. I guessed this was the other side of the stripper job, huh? Sometimes they'd need to touch a man that physically repulsed them, and other times, they needed to stop themselves from touching a man they really wanted to.

Because yes, this was hot. And I would have torn those panties apart and lifted her to sit on my dick, but she wasn't Isabel. She wasn't what I wanted. As usual, the same as most other times in my life, I had to control myself and know my boundaries. If I'd fucked this dancer tonight, I wouldn't have felt good about myself in the morning. That's just how it was. I knew Isabel was marrying Stepan, but I couldn't move on, not yet. I was still holding onto the hope of her.

## CHAPTER 17

# ISABEL



I stood facing the full-length mirror and smoothed my wedding dress over my baby bump. It was small; I was only three months along, and not many people knew yet. Stepan didn't want his more conservative associates to think this was a shotgun wedding. Beyond that, he was overjoyed to hear that his first heir was on the way.

I twisted to the side and looked in the mirror. It looked kind of sweet if you knew there was a baby in there. I had a healthy glow to my skin and true happiness in my heart, which had nothing to do with getting married and everything to do with becoming a mother. It wasn't something I'd envisioned happening so soon, especially not with Stepan, but since my fate with him was sealed—through the threat of his wrath and now, with carrying his child—I found the situation tolerable.

And the wedding itself was certainly something to feel happy about. It was at the nearest, most gorgeous Orthodox church I'd ever been to. It looked like a castle with all of its steeples as golden crosses.

I walked down the aisle holding Mama at my side, wearing the dress she'd initially been against—after some convincing, she'd agreed that it was actually a classy, sophisticated style. No frills, no lace, just soft, flowing satin. Appropriate for a bratva queen, actually. I couldn't lower myself to wear the kinds of dresses worn by all the other brides of the time—fun and pretty and festive. No, my wedding was respectful and near to royalty. I liked it. It helped me keep my head up high.

The long trail swept around my feet when I turned to face Stepan. I handed my flowers to Inessa—flown in from Belarus to be my maid of honor—and flashed my eyes over Aleksei before landing back on Stepan. He lifted

the soft veil over my head, revealing my flawless makeup done to accentuate my dark brown eyes. I hardened myself, refusing to let my eyes flicker over Stepan's shoulder to Aleksei again.

The priest began.

It was difficult, saying those words: "I do." I noticed Alek's eyes drop down while Stepan's face lit up. The love in his eyes was true, even if he got aggressive with me from time to time. It didn't mean that he didn't love me, quite the opposite. Ever since hearing of my pregnancy, he'd been gentle and loving, very strict about what I ate or how much I was walking around. I was hardly allowed to leave the house.

The reception was more glamorous than any party I'd ever been to. Out of all of the events Stepan took me to, none of them compared to the beauty and wonder that we saw when we arrived back at the estate, where the party was held within the gardens. The party was held in a massive white tent, closed at the sides to keep the cold out.

I knew it was because Stepan wanted his guards around. Something was going on that caused him to up his security team and have guards literally surround us at all times. I didn't want to know. I felt happy for the first time in a long time, and I didn't want to ruin that for myself.

I let myself enjoy the moment. At first, I thought it was my special day, that everything—all of the decorations and the cake, the dancing and the partying—was for me. But I realized quickly that it wasn't really. Not completely. It was for Stepan's image.

After a few drinks, he began to brush me off and laugh loudly with his close friends and associates. He'd done his part; he'd danced with me and cut the cake. I didn't care too much though; when I saw my mama and Essa chatting enthusiastically, I slipped out through the walls of the tent and took a deep breath in the cold air.

It wasn't long before Alek joined me.

"A bride shouldn't be out here on her own," his deep voice said behind me, and I turned around, smiling lightly. I knew he would come.

"Why? Are there bad men out to get me?" I looked over my shoulders quickly, feigning panic.

He laughed too, smiling widely. "No, Isa, because a groom shouldn't want to leave her side for even a moment. He should have her in his arms, dancing the night away."

I grew quiet. "Well... It's no surprise. And truly, I'm fine out here, I

wanted the fresh air.”

As I shrugged, looking around me, Alek reached out for my hand and drew me in. His other hand slid around my hip and stilled low on my back—beneath the drape of my dress, respectfully not against my bare skin—and pulled me closer.

“Alek, what are you doing?” I whispered harshly, but my body didn’t pull away.

His head bent down to look into my eyes, and his gaze softened. “You deserve a proper dance, Isabel.”

He began to sway our bodies from side to side, following the music coming from within the tent and pressing my body against his to lead my body. I sighed, melting into the movements and allowing him to pull me in. “Stepan did dance with me—”

“Yes... he did. But he didn’t do it quite like this, did he?”

His hand reached up to swipe his thumb across my cheek and lift my chin up. It was so loving. Our mouths were inches from each other. I thought he might kiss me. I wanted him to kiss me.

I whispered, holding onto his wrist lightly, “No... he didn’t.”

Alek was the wiser one between the two of us and lightly pushed me away to twirl me around, making me laugh. I landed back into his arms and he smiled so genuinely. “You look breathtaking, Isabel. *Krasavitsa*...” he added softly. Gorgeous.

“Thank you.” I smiled and brushed my hair behind my ear. We stopped dancing and separated.

I was about to walk back inside when he added, “The pregnancy glow suits you.”

My hand quickly lifted to my stomach as I turned back to face him. “I wasn’t sure if you knew.”

“Yeah,” he dropped his head, nodding and pushing his hands deep into his pants pockets. “I’m happy for you.” His tone was genuine.

I smiled and shrugged. “I’m happy for me too.”

He winked. “That’s my girl.”

IN THE MORNING, I WOKE UP IN ONE OF THE GUEST ROOMS IN THE HIGHEST,

most private section of the castle-like mansion. Stepan snored lightly beside me and I looked around. Since, according to him, it was safer to stay at the estate, the wedding planner and house staff thought it appropriate to set up a “honeymoon suite.”

It was really quite beautiful, with white material draped across every wall and sheer curtains covering the windows. There were red roses everywhere, and candles that were already lit when we entered the room. I wore a satin negligee in a beige color that had lace along the bottom seam and over my slowly growing breasts. I felt beautiful, and I ran my hand in circles across my belly, not sure if the little one could even feel it but caressing them lovingly, nonetheless.

I turned onto my side, facing the windows lighting up quickly with the morning sun. For a moment, I allowed my imagination to break free. Everything was already perfect, but there was one thing I would change in my mind’s image.

Aleksei’s arm would slide over my hip, with his hand cupping my belly as his lips found my neck and kissed me good morning. I’d never been in an actual bed with him, but I liked to imagine that’s what he would do. He would turn me around and very easily, with those thick arms, lift me onto him. I’d straddle him with my thighs pressed tightly against his sides and lean down to kiss him, allowing my hair to fall to one side and drape across his large shoulder. We would tell each other how happy we were to be married, to be forever each other’s, and we would both look down at my stomach with excitement and adoration.

A groan and a hand stretching out—knocking my arm—shook me from my dreaming.

“Ah, *malyshka*,” Stepan said. “What a wonderful night, my love.” He kissed my shoulder briefly, then turned to get up. I sat up.

“Where are you going?”

“Well,” he chuckled patronizingly, “business doesn’t stop just because we got married. These things are constantly on the move. You know that.”

“But our honeymoon... we need to pack and get the staff ready for—”

He froze and clicked his fingers, hissing between his teeth, “Right... I forgot to tell you. Um, we’ll need to postpone that.”

We were supposed to be flying to Greece for two weeks, to lay back in the sun and feel its warmth, and swim in the bluest of waters. I’d been so excited about it, I even bought various bikinis which, obviously, weren’t easy



to find in Moscow.

“Postpone until when?” I asked.

“Well, maybe next year?”

“What?” I stood up out of bed and stomped toward him as he pulled his pants on. “Next fucking year?”

“This shit going down right now is crazy, Isabel. It’s dangerous, and it’s unexpected. I have no idea what might go wrong. Going to Greece right now would be the worst move for a *bratva* king to make!”

“It’s not just *going to Greece!*” I raged. “It’s your damn *honeymoon!* It’s about starting a *marriage* together!”

“I know, I know.” He started to take my hands and try to calm me down.

“I thought that was what you wanted! To marry me! To make me your goddamn queen! But look at this! You treat me like nothing on our very first day of being wed!”

“*Meelaya...*”

“Don’t call me that!”

“This isn’t good for the baby. You need to calm down.”

“Oh it isn’t? Me shouting at you isn’t good for the baby? Well what about this life it’s being born into, huh? What about its father not giving a shit—”

“That’s enough,” he said in a dark tone.

Stepan held my wrists tight and slowly, though forcefully, pushed me to sit down on the bed. He put his shirt on and buttoned it up as he spoke sternly. “Your hormones are clearly all over the place. It’s just the pregnancy. It’s probably best for you to stay home anyway, to rest and not put your body through any strain.”

I glared at him. As if he knew what was best for me. By the looks of things, bullets would come flying through our very own windows before I could even put my body through any kind of fucking strain.

“Then let me go without you,” I said, my arms folded as I pouted. “Lying on the beaches of Greece is the best rest I’ll get.”

Stepan looked at me, frowning, then began to laugh.

“What?” I asked, slamming my hands on the bed. “What is so crazy about that? I’ve been so excited about this!”

“Isabel!” Stepan said loudly, still laughing. “Don’t you get it? You’re mine now. You’re not going anywhere without me. You’re staying in this house until I get back.” His voice calmed down from amused to serious as he ran the back of his finger along my cheek. “Be a good girl, Isabel.”

## CHAPTER 18

# ALEKSEI



Stepan walked out of the house showered and dressed, but without his bags and without Isabel.

“Where’s Isabel? The pilot is already fueled and ready—”

“Oh no, you can tell him it’s off. We’re not going to Greece.”

“What? Why?”

He walked up to me, lowering his voice so the guards stationed at the corners of the house couldn’t hear his angered words, dripping with urgency. “Because, Aleksei, Dima is basically threatening to launch a full-blown attack against the Koslovs if we don’t get him the money for the next shipment. As in, today. You fucking know this, yet you ask me bullshit questions!”

“Yes, boss,” I said slowly, “but we have it handled. I’m going to the meeting, I’m making the deal. We only have a few more packages to sell and we’ll have the right amount. You,” I tried to sound calm and comforting, “are supposed to be taking your wonderful bride on your honeymoon. It’s important.”

“You think I’m going to sit there on a fucking beach while Dima’s men blow my house to rubble? No. He wants to see me. He needs to see me, you know that. He doesn’t trust you.”

“Because I don’t trust him,” I said in a low tone, but it only angered him more.

“You see? How the fuck am I supposed to trust you with him, then? Huh? Just get us to the fucking meeting.”

He stormed over to the car and opened the backdoor himself to get in, then shut it with force. What was his problem? I’d known him for years; I

knew he was a spoiled fucking egomaniac but to pass up on the chance to go to Greece with Isabel?

To lie in the sun with her and watch her belly grow little by little while she wears only bikinis—yes, I'd seen the shopping—to have the chance to get away from all of this and just be alone with her for two whole weeks? He was clearly psychotic.

I clenched my teeth together and looked toward the house, as though I'd see her through the walls, then turned around to do my job.

IT WASN'T LIKE STEPAN TO COWER. WHILE HE WASN'T THE STRONGEST MAN I knew, his upbringing held constant reassurance that with the Koslov name, he had all the power, that people should always cower to him and do what he wanted, as he had royal blood within the bratva. Not just that, but his father instilled a certain business intelligence in him as he brought him along to meetings similar to the one we were headed for now. A few wise words for Stepan to carry through life.

I was sure that they were along the same lines as the words my father had said to me. That no one with less power than you can stand a chance.

We drove in convoy. Three cars, Stepan's black Mercedes-Benz E320 sedan driven by me and two black Hummer H1s filled to the brim with soldiers, guns, and ammo. Just in case. Dima had never shown up to any meeting with more than four guys with him, and those guys were... well, not bratva trained.

Stepan didn't like the feeling he'd been overwhelmed with recently. The threats Dima made were baseless, but with Isabel being pregnant and the entire family coming to town for their wedding, he'd been a little worried, to say the least. Once he'd calmly told me his plan in the car, before leaving, I'd made the necessary arrangements.

The two of us pulled up to the agreed meeting point, an old junkyard with piles of rusted cars and all their different parts scattered across the ground. Since Dima wasn't a part of any bratva organization, he had no issue meeting on our territory. He believed we were here to talk business.

"Stepan," Dima said, stepping forward while his four men remained behind him. "I hope you're here with a little present for me."

“Oh, Dima,” Stepan chuckled as he closed the car door and buttoned his suit. I walked up to stand beside him, only a step behind his shoulder. “The present you’re asking for is nothing small.”

He shrugged in response, calmly dropping his head to the side. “What good is business if it’s not growing?”

“Hmm...” Stepan nodded. “Aleksei, what was it that my father always used to say about business?”

My eyes remained on Dima’s as I replied, my hands held behind my back. “Business is only good when it is a balanced scale. Even playing fields, even rewards, even trust.”

Stepan shrugged. “Dima, you’ve made it clear that you are tipping the scale.” He walked up to him, standing close and practically fuming through his words. “That your greed for ‘rewards’ has grown heavier than the trust you think I have for you.”

Dima narrowed his eyes. “I’m the only one with the good shit in this whole fucking city. My supplier is the only one with this grade of—”

“Alek,” Stepan said calmly, interrupting him. I lifted my hand in the air and gave the signal. Very swiftly, four shots were fired at the same time, from our left and right sides. Our men were behind the junk cars, and Dima hadn’t turned around to see the little red dot on each of his idiot guards’ foreheads.

They fell straight down, buckled legs, limp bodies, lying in growing puddles of their own blood.

“What?” Dima looked around, saw this, and terror immediately flooded his eyes. “No, Stepan! I was just trying to grow our business together! It was for your benefit as well. Your profit would have grown too.”

“No, Dima,” Stepan said, “you were trying to fuck me.”

Stepan punched him in the gut and Dima stumbled back, coughing. He tried to run and tackle Stepan, but I was close by and set my foot out, tripping him. He fell with his face in the dirt at Stepan’s feet.

By then, our boys, all eight of them, had packed up their guns and approached us. Stepan pointed at two of them and down at Dima. They turned him over with a firm grip on each of his arms. He screamed for help, kicking his legs as Stepan pulled daggers from his jacket and pinned them into his thighs simultaneously, rendering his legs immobile from the excruciating pain. Dima cried out loudly, but we were on Koslov territory. No one around here would help him.

Stepan slowly kneeled down over his body, slipping knuckle busters over his fingers.

“I told you from the start, Dima, around here we work on trust. I don’t give a flying fuck,” he spat into Dima’s face, “who your goddamn supplier is. You are the poison they call greed, and I’m ridding our precious city of your dishonorable filth.”

He started with the right hand, knocking Dima’s cheekbone and splitting the skin. Then the left, cracking his jaw. He kept going, even lowering his blows to crack Dima’s collarbones. As he did so, Dima cried out in pain, his tears mixing with the blood streaming from his face. But Stepan... he was laughing. His smile was wide and his eyes bright with excitement.

“Think you can fuck with me, huh?” he shouted down into his face, and gave three quick shots with his right hand against Dima’s head. “I’m the goddamn king of this city, you *debil yobani!*” Fucking idiot.

His laughs turned high-pitched, like a child overwhelmed with excitement. But his blows were hitting deadweight. There were no more cries, and frankly, no more of Dima’s face to punch. It was mulch.

I put my hand on Stepan’s shoulder and he sat back, breathing deeply. He looked up at me with a smile. “That’s how you take back power, Aleksei.” He groaned as he stood up, and I held his elbow. “But I’m sure you knew that. You were my papa’s guard after all!” He laughed again, and a few of our men laughed too.

Yes, his father was a ruthless man. But I didn’t think I’d ever seen him laugh quite so happily as he beat a man to death.

IT TOOK US A FEW HOURS TO DIG A DITCH AMONG THE CARS AND ROLL THE bodies into it, soak them in gasoline, and watch them burn. We covered the mass grave up and even lowered a smashed-up car over it, just in case someone grew a little too curious. It was imperative that we stayed vigilant; any slipups, and not only would we all go to jail, but we’d all lose our lives.

Stepan took his car and one of the men to go celebrate, as he called it. The guys said they were heading over to join him at the club.

The club, of course. The day after his wedding, he was smacking some stripper’s ass while watching it jiggle in his face. I wondered why he didn’t

just pack up and go to Greece now that the threat was handled. But the answer was clear: Stepan just had a power rush. He'd beaten a man to death, taken his power back, and just about rolled in the blood of his enemy. He was in no state to be romantic. His bloodlust brought back his old self: drugs, booze, strippers.

*Fuck this...*

I told them I wasn't in the mood—something they always easily believed due to my near-constant seriousness—and went home. I tried to lie to myself and say it wasn't to go and see Isabel, but this deep pull inside of me needed to know if she was okay. Being ditched by your husband the day after your wedding and being told there'd be no honeymoon for the foreseeable future, that was fucking harsh.

Back at the house, it was late, and most staff were already in their rooms except for the few guards stationed outside the house. I was free to roam and quietly approach Isabel's bedroom. Carefully, I placed my forehead against the closed door with my eyes closed, battling with myself. But then I heard her soft cries, and there was no stopping me.

I knocked. "Isabel? It's me."

I heard a little scrambling and then her light footsteps up to the door. "Alek?"

"Yeah."

She opened the door, and I could see she'd just wiped her tears from her cheeks. She sniffed, pretending that wasn't the case. "What's... what's wrong?"

My eyes brushed over her face, puffy and red but still so beautiful. She wore a soft sweatpants and sweater combination.

"Did you have a good send-off with your mom and Inessa today?" They would have flown back to Belarus since Isabel was supposed to be on her way to Greece.

"Yeah!" She tried to smile. "I um... I told them that Stepan and I would be going to Greece tomorrow. But that was a lie. The first of many, I'm starting to believe."

I sighed, looked around, and stepped into the room, pulling her into me and closing the door behind me simultaneously. She came easily, leaning her cheek against my chest with a small sob. Her hands clasped behind my back, holding me tightly, and I ran one hand down her back, the other over her hair.

"I'm sorry, Isa... I know this is only the start of what's going to be a..."

difficult marriage. I know it sounds harsh, but soon you'll learn to expect these things. Stepan still surprises me with his rash decisions, but I've learned to roll with it."

"Roll with it?" she asked, pulling away and looking up. "Just roll with him disregarding me the morning after I gave him my hand? I always knew it wasn't the perfect arrangement but that was so... so..."

"Harsh, yeah. He's no romantic."

"He used to be," she said softly, dropping her forehead between my pecs.

I swallowed deeply, not wanting to tell her that it was all manipulation. That this was the true Stepan. I couldn't help but drop my lips against her head and whisper against her hair, "If I could take you to Greece myself, I would. In a heartbeat."

"Oh, please do!" She looked up again, this time smiling through her teary eyes. "We could pretend you're my husband and share the honeymoon suite and—"

I knew she was joking, neither of us was that stupid, so I chuckled as she spoke and brushed her hair behind her ear. But her words cut off quickly when we heard Stepan's voice. He was entering the house downstairs, loudly laughing with his men.

"He's drunk," Isabel said, freezing with fear in her eyes.

I held her cheek and locked my eyes with hers. "I'll be close by. I promise."

She nodded, and I quickly slipped out the door to hide behind a bend in the corridor.

I heard him stumble up to the door and practically fall into the room. I was barely able to hear the conversation, but I could hear Isabel tell him something along the lines of still being pissed about the honeymoon and maybe he should stay in another room for the night. I heard him speak in a low tone at first, and my back straightened. He wasn't trying to comfort her; he was still so rushed on his power trip that any kind of disobedience wasn't going to be let down easily.

I approached the door and listened more closely.

"I told you this already, you're mine now. There's no going back. And you'll do everything I say, like a good little wife."

"Stepan, this isn't you!"

"This is me, *meelaya!*" He laughed devilishly. "You just didn't know it until now."



“Please, just give me some space. I’m allowed to be angry about you throwing away our honeymoon!”

“Allowed?” he raged, and I heard him approach her.

“Stepan,” she said with a wobble of fear in her voice. “Stepan, the baby, you can’t—”

“Can’t do what, Isabel? Touch my wife?”

I heard a bit of a struggle and banged my fist against the door. “Stepan.”

“Fuck off!”

*Fuck that.*

I swung the door open and saw him with his fists balled into her sweater, holding her against the wall with her feet dangling at his shins.

I couldn’t help my own body’s movements and stepped up to him, closing my hand around his neck and pushing back until he stumbled and had to let her go. She dropped down and cried in fear, then quickly ran out and slammed the door. There was the faint sound of another door closing—so it looked like she was the one sleeping in a guest room tonight.

Meanwhile, Stepan’s enraged eyes were pinned on me. I let go of his throat but held my chest out and my head high. I wasn’t going to cower to this prick right now. Chances were, he wouldn’t even remember it in the morning.

“Stepan,” I growled out angrily, “this is no way to treat your pregnant wife. Your papa would be fucking ashamed of you right now. You back the fuck off, you respect her, and you never, *ever*, touch her like that again.”

I didn’t even need to raise my voice, it was so full of fury it shook with every word.

Stepan’s eyes narrowed, followed by an angry smile fueled with amusement. “The fuck did you just say to me? Is this even you, Alek? Papa’s favorite guard? The quiet man who always did what he was told?”

“Yeah. The quiet man who’s always done what my first boss told me to do—keep you out of trouble. Your papa loved you, but he knew you; he knew you would do shit like this, let your power get to your head so much that you come home and attack your pregnant wife. What the fuck is wrong with you?”

I could see that got to him. At least, to his drunken mind. It was a shock not only to hear me speak like this, but to hear that it came straight from his father’s mouth.

“Get out of here, Aleksei... Leave me the fuck alone.”

He was suddenly tired. I saw emotion and anger tangle within his eyes as they drooped. He turned for the bed, crashing onto it face down.

THE NEXT MORNING, I WAS CALLED INTO STEPAN'S HOME OFFICE.

I stood at his desk with my shoulders back and my hands clasped loosely in front of me while he sat back, swinging slowly from side to side in his chair. His eyes weren't angry. They were calm, as though he had some kind of plan.

*Yebat'*... What was he going to do now?

"Aleksei... I've been thinking about this for a while now. And, uh, recent events have helped me make up my mind."

I watched him without answering.

"I want you to go and run our Koslov expansion in Saint Petersburg."

"What?"

"Yes! Why not? You've been at my side all these years; you know exactly what to do. And, as you so delicately put it last night, I have a pregnant wife to care for here." He shrugged, basically telling me I did this to myself. "Dima mentioned that his supply came from Saint Petersburg, so I need you to go over there and find out who the original supplier is. Make him a deal. We'll keep this in-house, no middleman anymore, right? Much safer that way."

I watched him, wondering if he knew just how difficult this would be for me. Either he knew that I loved Isabel and wanted to keep us apart, or he really just wanted to get rid of me for a while, feeling tired of my—and his father's—judgment.

"Alek... let me put this plainly." He sat forward with his elbows on his desk, his eyes narrowing slightly. "What you did last night was out of line. But you are too valuable for me to throw away. So I'm just going to get you out of my sight for a while. A few years maybe?"

*A few years?*

"Take it as your opportunity to start a new empire. Be your own boss. Trust me, I'll make it clear that you're the head of that operation. I'm doing you a goddamn favor, so you better take it and be fucking grateful."

My jaw clenched for a moment. I looked to the side, my mind a

whirlwind of thoughts about leaving Isabel alone with this maniac.

How could I protect Isabel now? That must have been another motive for him—to be able to treat his wife as he wished without me looking over his shoulder all the time. His father was no longer around to “station” me at his son’s shoulder. Stepan was the Koslov king now, and if I didn’t do exactly as told, I’d probably be killed. And then there would be no saving Isabel.

I looked back at him. “Thank you for the opportunity, *boss*,” I practically hissed.

He smiled. “Hey, didn’t your brother move there? Around the time you joined us?”

*The fucking asshole.*

“Maybe you can find him... reconnect, if, you know, you’re able to forgive him for this life sentence he put you in!” He laughed at his own joke.

I bit my tongue, turned on my heel, and walked out.

I would find a way. I would get the house staff on my side, gain their intel, maybe even somehow station a guard I could trust to protect her while I was away. And I would do everything in my power to get back here as soon as fucking possible.

## CHAPTER 19

# ISABEL



## *Five Years Later*

I held my baby Ivan in my arms, cooing and smiling at his bubbling mouth and outstretched arms, his tiny, chubby fingers clawing at my own. I was seated in the children's room, previously a grand, guest bedroom suite, now turned into their chaotic playhouse with a closed-off pen for two-year-old Dmitry to wobble around in, and a makeshift racetrack through the scattered toys for my oldest, Misha, to run and fight with his plastic sword against all the pirates and baddies he saw but the rest of us didn't.

It was chaotic, but it was my favorite place in the whole house. No, the whole world.

As I sat in my rocking chair and gazed through the wide windows, I thought about the few years that had passed with my children.

“WAS ALEKSEI BACK IN MOSCOW BY THEN?” MAXIM ASKED ME.

“No,” I shook my head. I hadn't seen Aleksei for five whole years. I wondered if, out of all the things Stepan did to me, that was the worst. I wasn't sure. All I knew was that it hurt, more and more every day, to have to live that bratva life without him watching me from the shadows.

“So... he wasn’t even a part of the first years of my life,” Misha added, in a kind of confusion. “Somehow I felt he was always there.”

I smiled. “So did I. I knew he was talking with the house staff from time to time. And there was a certain guard who joined the security team about a year after Alek left... a young, inexperienced kid. His name was Lev. I don’t know how I knew it, but it was clear that Alek had somehow sent him. He even spoke about his childhood in Saint Petersburg.”

My boys watched me with a certain wonder in their eyes, curiosity about the life that not only I—but they too—had led before my leaving them behind.

“So...” Dmitry asked with a deep inhale, “how was dear old Papa as a husband? Did you ever get that honeymoon?”

“Well, yes...” I shrugged. I got it. But it never felt like an actual honeymoon.

AFTER THAT NIGHT WHEN ALEKSEI STEPPED INTO THE BEDROOM TO SAVE ME, Stepan held back a little. Instead of coming home drunk, he stayed away or slept in a guest room. It was weird, this feeling that even though Aleksei had been told to leave, he was still protecting me, just with a few words spoken in an angry tone on one fateful night.

Once Misha was born, we hired a nanny onto the house staff but truly, I was there all the time. My only commitments were the fancy dinners I was expected to attend—Stepan’s associates’ weddings or birthdays and the like. I’d become a somewhat popular figure in the bratva community, being the Koslov queen. I even hosted a big Christmas dinner and had my mama flown in to join us for a whole month to celebrate and get to know her grandson as well.

Stepan didn’t like that much. I could never figure out why. I knew his thoughts on the matter, that the more “outsiders” there were, the more danger everyone was in. But that couldn’t have been the whole truth. He didn’t talk much about his own parents, and eventually, I wondered if he just didn’t like the idea of a parent, or any kind of authoritative or elderly figure in the house at all. He had to have all the power.

Of course, I would sit on the phone with her and talk for hours. She was

retired, growing old and lonely; she loved to chat and hear the babies carrying on around me. I tried again to have Stepan allow her to live by us, or just in Moscow, even if only to watch her condition as she aged, but he was dead set on saying no. All the time. *No*.

After I asked again, he had my phone calls with her monitored by his security team. And a few months after that, apparently, I'd revealed too much and was cut off from calling her altogether. It couldn't have been a year later when she passed, and Stepan was forced—even if just to keep up his Koslov image—to take us as a family to Belarus for the funeral.

It was completely different from my brother's funeral so long ago. Then, Stepan had been charming and actually trying to appease me; he even told me he loved me for the first time then. But I should have known, just from the fact that he'd missed the whole ceremony, that I would always come last. Not even second anymore, last.

Stepan held up his looks—his bright blue, charming eyes and wafts of blonde hair; he was still a renowned and respected king to all those in Moscow who knew of him and his power. Over those five years, he tried now and again to get into my good books, and I tried to be a good wife.

It was around the time he got clean of drugs and alcohol and started taking his business a little more seriously. His profits skyrocketed, and with this new health and power mindset he really tried to make our marriage something a little more romantic, a little more normal. That was when we went to Greece.

Finally, I not only got out of the house but the country. I felt the sun on my skin, experienced a really bad sunburn for the first time, and felt the strange feeling of having Stepan's full attention, even if I knew deep down that it was all a show. We'd left Misha with the nanny for those two weeks and in our attempts at romance... Dmitry was conceived.

It didn't last long. Stepan grew bored, especially once I was visibly pregnant and no longer attractive to him. Added to that, I was no longer a safe target to push around, once I had a baby inside of me. So things began to slip sideways again.

I became so tired of his drunken drama that I created a safe haven for myself—very much supported by the female staff of the house. We set up another main bedroom at the end of the hall so Stepan wouldn't even need to pass my door. I decorated it with my own favorite colors and florals and set a plush armchair in front of the windows.

It was my space. And I didn't plan on entering Stepan's bedroom ever again. He was having enough sex with prostitutes and strippers, I was sure. He didn't seem to care, or even notice at first, but one night he came home particularly angry and high. With crazed eyes, he kicked my door down and began yelling at me.

"You are mine, Isabel! Mine!" he shouted. "What makes you think you have the right to keep your body from me, huh?"

"Stepan, leave my room now!" I growled. "You lost all rights to my body the moment you started throwing it at the fucking wall!"

"You are my wife!" he raged. "Mine to do with as I please! Even more so because I am the goddamn Koslov king!" His eyes buzzed with sick pride. "And I will have anything I want."

When his voice grew deep, I knew I was in trouble. I didn't even want to yell out for help, because as Stepan began to undress, he placed his handgun right there, on the table. If my guardian angel Lev, sent by Aleksei, was to come running in here, he'd be shot dead.

So I took it. I left Stepan with scratches and bite marks, and bruises to his legs wherever I could kick them, but I took the rape. That night Stepan left me with not only a black eye and my ribs cracked at the back where he'd shoved me down, but also a sweet little present I later named Ivan.

So, no matter how much pain I was in, emotionally and physically, I didn't regret that night. Out of my trauma grew a gorgeous little boy.

When Lev saw me after that night, he closed my door and spoke in harsh whispers.

"Isabel, why didn't you call out? I thought Stepan had gone straight to his own room."

I shrugged. "He had his gun on him, Lev. I couldn't imagine calling you to your death. It was in his eyes. That bloodlust. You know the look... It was too dangerous."

"Too dangerous? Look at you!" The sweet, young guard seemed to have tears in his eyes. He held a certain guilt and pain that I never knew of before then. It was clear that there was a reason that Alek sent him and not some other strong, emotionless guard.

"Lev," I'd told him, taking his arm, "I am a strong woman. I've taken a lot of shit. None of that is worth you taking a bullet through the skull. And you know who taught me that..."

He closed his eyes and nodded. "Aleksei."



“Yes. He taught me to pick my battles, to bite through the pain when it’s necessary so that we can all stay alive.”

“I really don’t think this is what he meant by that—”

“Just don’t tell him, okay?” I stopped him. I couldn’t stand the thought of Aleksei coming here and starting a war in my name, over a few bruises. Most of all, I didn’t want to lose my children. “Tell him that I’m strong, and I’m keeping my head up high.”

*That’s my girl...* I heard Alek’s voice echo through my mind.

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN I’D ACTUALLY TRIED TO RUN AWAY.

It was when he saw me at the kitchen table with little Ivan, a newborn in my arms, and I’d laughed at something one of the chefs had said. The guard eating his breakfast in the kitchen laughed too, and so did the house manager, a stern old lady with a crooked nose. I didn’t remember the joke, but I remembered that having a new baby in the house was somewhat uplifting, and the staff were in high spirits.

That night, before bedtime, he rounded up the oldest boys, Misha and Dmitry, four and two years old. He had a guard fetch me from my room, and he led us all down into the basement, where the guard from the kitchen was tied up with his hands behind his back.

Stepan picked up a long, sharp knife from the steel table to the side, where other guards stood, swallowing deeply in fear. “You want to flirt with my guards, Isabel? Huh? You want to embarrass me in front of all of the staff?”

“No, no Stepan! That was not at all what happened!” I held the boys behind my legs and pleaded. “We were *all* laughing together! It was an innocent joke!”

“Oh, you want to flirt with everyone, then?”

“No!”

“I guess just this one will have to do, to get the point across. Boys, make sure you watch; this will be your first lesson about keeping a firm grip on your household.”

He stood behind the innocent guard and slit his throat in one silent, clean movement. Blood splattered across the floor, staining my dress, a few

droplets hitting my sons' faces. I cried out and turned to hold them against me, to cover their eyes and wipe the blood from their sweet little faces.

Stepan left with one last sneer. "You don't get to baby them, Isabel. This is their future. They will be ruthless Koslov kings one day; just like me."

By morning light, I was gone. Swiftly helped out of the house by Lev, I somehow carried all three of my sons, with as big a bag as I could carry, straight into the city and caught a taxi downtown. I'd been saving cash secretly—at least I had that—but I couldn't stay where Stepan's interconnected web of spies would find me. We hid out in a motel far across the city for a few days while I planned my next steps. Buy a car, drive into the woods, build a shelter, I didn't care! I couldn't go back.

Of course, it was the biggest mistake I'd ever made. We were found, and once back at the house, we were separated. I no longer had access to my children—they were the Koslov heirs, and I'd tried to steal them away from Stepan.

He beat me in front of the crying children; they were screaming and blinded by their tears, but still he carried on. It was the worst beating he'd ever given me. I was no longer pregnant, and frankly, I didn't think he cared if I died. I'd given him three heirs already, and I was becoming a liability.

I was locked in the room I once called my safe haven and only let out for supervised walks and supervised visits with my sons in their playroom. The nanny took such great pity on me, sometimes she would sneak them into my room while Stepan was out and the guards were all distracted.

But that wasn't enough. It could never be enough. I missed them and I cried for them, while their traumatized minds blurred out the images they'd seen, and they laughed with childlike joy in their own little prison.

## CHAPTER 20

# ALEKSEI



“Thank you, Igor,” I said into the phone at my desk. “I trust you’ll have the delivery ready for next week?”

Gregori walked into my office and sat back in the armchair in front of my desk, resting one leg over the other.

“Good. I’ll have the funds put together,” I said before I put the phone down and looked at him.

He lifted his eyebrows. “Business going well, I see?”

“Nothing for you to see,” I sat back, tipping my head to the side. “You have your own business to worry about.”

He rolled his eyes at me and stood up with a shrug, “Just trying to have a conversation, but okay then! If that’s the case I won’t bother you anymore.”

I watched him leave and close the door behind him. My brother had done well for himself in Saint Petersburg. I hadn’t spoken to him much before, but in the last five years I spent in the city we’d rekindled our sibling relationship, and I’d accepted his invitation to stay in his large city house.

After leaving Moscow and starting a life here as a tainted teen going through drug withdrawal, he’d struggled a lot. But he found himself waiting tables and got to know a regular at the restaurant, who was clearly a man of money. It didn’t surprise me that Gregori approached him and asked him what his secret was. It sounded just like him, looking for a shortcut to wealth. The man, a hedge fund manager, took him under his wing and taught him everything he knew. Gregori was successful; he looked calm, happy, and healthy, and that was all I wanted for him after all.

I wasn’t an idiot; I assumed his fund management wasn’t always above board, but I had my finger on the pulse of the Saint Petersburg bratva, and as

long as I didn't hear of him getting into that particular kind of fund management, it wasn't my problem. He knew the boundaries; if he so much as made a passing comment about my work in the *bratva*, he'd get knocked into next week. He'd put me here. I'd made it work. He didn't get to say a word about it or get involved in any way because then, what was this all for? If he threw away the sacrifice I made for him, then my staying away from Isabel was for nothing. And I wasn't about to let that happen.

He hadn't married; he was only in his 30s and still seeing a string of gold-digging women whom he used equally for their bodies. When I accepted his invitation to live with him, I made sure to include the condition that I had my own side of the house and my own office. Which of course, he didn't always respect.

The phone on my desk rang again, and I absentmindedly picked up. "Chernoff."

"Alek!" Stepan's voice surprised me. "You've been very successful there in Saint Petersburg, huh?"

"You know that already, boss," I answered, not exactly in the mood for his playful banter. He knew me, I just liked to get business done. "Was there something you needed?"

"Yes, actually. I want you to come home."

I sat forward in my chair. "Home? To Moscow? Why?"

I'd tried to convince Stepan to have me go back to Moscow on multiple occasions. After I'd set up a strong, trustworthy *bratva* team here, after I'd trained a right-hand man to take over from me, I'd done whatever I could to make it easy for me to get up and go back. But he'd always denied me, almost absentmindedly, as though it was an unnecessary trouble.

At certain points over the past five years, I'd gone covert during my "off-duty" time. I drove through the night to stand across the street and watch Isabel come and go with her little boys. She looked happy with them.

"Well..." he sighed, "you've set up a good team there. I think they could keep things running without you sitting there, right?"

"Why?" I repeated. I knew Stepan. There was more to this.

"I need you back here. Things are getting a little... out of hand. I need someone I can trust back in the house."

"In the house?" I knew there was a catch to this. After all these years of running my own goddamn *bratva* ring, to call me back to be a bodyguard, there had to be. But *fuck*, being in the house meant that I could see Isabel

again, even speak with her from time to time.

“Yes. Isabel stole my sons.”

“What?” I stood up.

“Don’t worry. I got them back. Her included. But the house staff are clearly not to be trusted, and I have business to deal with. I can’t fucking babysit everyone!”

“So you need me to be your glorified babysitter again?”

“I need you to head up my security team.” *That’ll do.* “Get them back in shape. Get me guys I can trust and make sure my fucking wife stays in her goddamn room.”

*Shit. What the fuck is going on there?*

“I’ll be there tomorrow.”

I put down the phone, not even interested in his reply because my rage was boiling over. I speedily punched Lev’s cell number into the landline.

“Lev, what the fuck is going on?”

He cleared his throat and spoke in hushed tones. “Alek! Hi... Ah, well, I guess you’ve heard...”

“Isabel left? She took the boys, and she left?”

“Yes.”

“Did you help her?”

A moment passed, and his voice came out like the squeak of a mouse. “Yes.”

I sighed, rubbing my fingers along my forehead. “Not well enough, clearly. You should have sent her here.”

“She was adamant that she would be okay! She had money, she just needed a safe way to get out of the city—”

“I am that safe way, Lev. *Me.* You should have called. We’d have made a plan. There’s a reason I put you there. Now fucking stay put, keep an eye on her, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I DROVE UP THE DRIVEWAY OF THE KOSLOV MOSCOW MANSION, FEELING A mixture of anger and trepidation, but excitement too—to see Isabel again. God, it had been so long, and we hadn’t spoken because... well, we’d gotten too close and that was essentially why I was sent away in the first place.

But now Stepan needed my help to watch over her, which was fantastic news, but at the same time, I dreaded what I might find inside the house. If things had gotten bad enough for her to run away, then things must have been extremely bad. I knew my girl. She wouldn't run for no reason. She was strong. I knew it was why she didn't call me for help. She always thought she could handle things on her own.

When I walked into Stepan's office he smiled. "Well that was fast. Eager to get out of that city?"

"Eager to get away from my brother." I shrugged. Stepan laughed and rounded his desk, giving me a hug and a hard smack on the shoulder before slowly heading back to his seat.

"I'm glad you're back. I've got Isabel and the boys separated. She won't take them away from me again." He turned back to lock eyes with me. "You hear me? Those are my sons. My future. The Koslov future."

"I understand," I said, pulling my back straight, getting back into the bodyguard stance.

"I don't know what to do with her... I honestly don't." He fell back into his seat with a sigh. "I only need her around for my image, because she's this fucking Koslov queen, respected by all the wives," he rolled his eyes, "and wanted by all the men." His voice deepened at the end, and he flexed his jaw angrily. "Except me. I'm fucking done with that bitch. But if she disappears, there will be a lot of questions. And I'm not ready for that right now."

Was he being serious? Discussing her "disappearance" as though it was a normal plan to have on the books? It just wasn't a convenient time to kill her? *Chto za huy?* What the fuck?

It was also clear that Stepan was not quite healthy. He was drinking and doing drugs again, I could tell by his red eyes that darted around the room, his constant sniffing, his fast, irrational conversation.

"I'll deal with this, Stepan. I'll talk with your team and figure out the situation. You rest up, alright, boss?"

He nodded tiredly, drooping his head, and gave me a tight smile. "Knew I could trust you, Alek. You're the only one."

I walked out and immediately found Lev, nervously waiting in the lobby of the house. It was a bittersweet reunion. I'd saved this kid from being used and killed by the *bratva*, much like my own little brother, only Lev wasn't anything like Gregori. He wasn't greedy or selfish; he never touched drugs. He only wanted to survive the abuse of his father and then ended up hungry

on the streets, looking for work. I took him under my wing, and eventually, I grew to trust him.

However, I was angry with him for not telling me how bad things had gotten. I could only think that he'd perhaps fallen for Isabel himself and believed her when she said she could handle it.

"Where is she?" I asked him.

He tipped his head toward the front door. "Supervised garden walk."

"Supervised? What the fuck is this? Lefortovo?"

I walked out and rounded the house to see a guard I'd worked with five years ago, still here, looking somberly toward the back corner of the garden. I followed his gaze and saw her, Isabel, sitting alone on a garden bench and looking down into the small pond. She tossed small bits of food into the water, which then rippled as fish came up to grab a piece.

I greeted the guard, who looked at me with happy, relieved eyes. "Aleksei, you're back!"

"Yes, and, I've got this." I jerked my head toward Isabel, and he quickly nodded, giving me a respectful smile before walking away.

I took a deep breath and approached her.

The closer I got, the more bruises I saw. There was a rather colorful one on her cheekbone—a mixture of purple, blue, and yellow. Her lip was split open but wasn't swollen, so it had healed somewhat already. Her hair was still a beautiful deep black color but pulled back into a messy bun instead of flowing over her shoulders.

She wore a dress and small boots with a shawl draped over her elbows. There were deep purple bruises on her upper arms.

Guilt overtook me. I couldn't believe that I'd let this happen. If only I'd listened to her long ago in Belarus and run away with her, I didn't know where we would have been today, but I knew she wouldn't have looked like this.

"Jesus... Isabel..." I said softly.

She jerked with fright and looked at me with wide eyes. "Aleksei?" She stood up and her eyes scanned the garden behind me. "What... what are you doing here?"

I kept studying her face as I spoke. "He called me back here. Why didn't you call me?"

"What?" She frowned as though that was an absurd idea.

"Why didn't you tell me it had gotten this bad?"



She scoffed, shaking her head. “Alek... It’s been five years... I figured you’d have moved on by now. Found a wife, had kids of your own.”

I narrowed my eyes and shook my head. “No.” I took a step closer and dropped my head down a little to look her level in the eyes. “It’s only ever been you. Even though I knew it might never happen. I only thought of you, of getting back here to see you. Are you telling me that you never thought of me?”

My voice was quiet and calm, I wasn’t accusing her, I was only trying to draw her honesty out. But it just seemed to frazzle her even more.

“Alek, I...” She shook her head, and anger bubbled over. “It’s only been me! I’ve protected myself! I’ve protected my sons! You weren’t here! And I wasn’t going to stand behind Lev and let the poor kid be killed in my name! Shame on you for expecting that of him! That he could ever live up to the deal you and I made! That you would be in the shadows! That you would always be there!”

Her tears spilled over her cheeks, and I quickly closed my arms around her trembling body, closing my eyes in pain.

“I’m so sorry, Isa... I’m so sorry...”

“You weren’t here!” she sobbed into my chest. “I thought of you all of the time! And it only made it so much more evident that you *weren’t here!*”

I felt the odd sensation of tears pricking my eyes. “I tried to be, Isabel... I promise, I tried. And hey,” I pulled her away with my hands on her arms, watching her wipe her tears, “Lev wasn’t supposed to protect you; he was just supposed to report back to me. I knew you could protect yourself. What I didn’t know was that he’d fall in love with you too and swap sides to be your undercover agent instead of mine!”

That pulled a laugh out of her. She breathed deeply, wiping her face and finding her calm as she stepped back. Her eyes brushed over my body, from bottom to top, over my hair, and stopped with her gaze stuck on mine. “I... I can’t believe you’re really here.”

“I’m here,” I assured her. “For good.”

“For good?”

“Yes. Trust me. I’m never leaving again. Not without you.”

Now that I’d seen what Stepan had done, I was a boiling furnace of rage inside. I knew I couldn’t walk into his office and rip his fucking head from his neck, but *blyad’!* I wanted to. I had to stop this madness and give him the death he so deserved, I just had to be clever about it. Fuck bratva loyalty. If

this was what the bratva “family” was all about, I was done.

Her eyes looked down and around as she processed my words. Then her fingers lifted to her cheek again, to the yellowing bruise there. “And this is how you’re seeing me for the first time in five years,” she laughed sourly, wiping her eyes and flattening her hair behind her ears.

I gave her a light smile and a wink. “I see the very same woman I first saw sliding down that pole...” She immediately blushed, but I wasn’t done. “A strong survivor, a woman who would do anything and everything to protect her family, to give them a chance at life. A chance that you, apparently, never thought you deserved.”

She shook her head, smiling tightly. “Oh, I did... I came to you and begged you for a life away from all of this.”

I frowned, feeling that guilt rise again. “I know, and I’m sorry I thought this would be the safer option.” My eyes bored into hers, and I let my anger seethe from my mouth. “It’s obviously not, and believe me... I’m going to find a way to kill that *svoloch*’.”

Her gaze deepened, her chin lifted, and her mouth set into a determined line. “Not without me you’re not.”

## CHAPTER 21

# ISABEL



That night I paced my room, alive with thoughts about Aleksei being back. Did Stepan really call him back? Was it because of the stunt I'd pulled? Did Stepan think Aleksei would get me back in line?

I laughed and quickly put my hand over my mouth, not wanting anyone to hear my happiness. I was still heartbroken over the separation from my children, but this gave me hope.

I knew it, I just knew it deep down in my heart that this time, Aleksei and I would finally win. We would find a way to get out from under Stepan's thick, controlling thumb and be free. Aleksei was going to be the one to help me save my sons. I should have known that his love was true, that I could have called him and had him help me escape.

There was no telling what would happen now. We didn't get a chance to discuss what exactly we would do; all we decided was that we were going to find a way to kill Stepan.

*Finally!*

A knock on my door made me swirl around in fright. The sound was way too soft to be Stepan, so my shoulders relaxed and I approached the door.

"Yes?"

"It's me. Can I come in?" Alek's voice was low in volume—clearly, he was making a secret visit.

"Please."

I heard the lock of my door turn and Alek's angular face appear under the dim glow of my bedroom lights. His dark hair and deep brown eyes set onto mine almost shocked me; I'd missed them so much. I didn't think I ever realized just how much I actually loved this man, how much I missed having

him around and always within reach, whether I needed him or not. The past five years were a slow descent into forgetting what that even felt like, and I was suddenly being reminded of that feeling with just the sight of him.

I stepped back and let him in. He closed the door, leaned his back against it, and locked it again from the inside. We watched each other for a moment, the heat rising with every second.

“Um... Did you want to talk about a plan now?” I asked, reminding myself that Aleksei probably wasn’t here to touch me, no matter how badly I wanted it. So often I’d thought about that first kiss we shared, and that one night of complete and all-consuming pleasure he’d given me. But those memories also reminded me that he would reject me until the day Stepan was dead, and then I was sure he would finally allow it. “About Stepan?” I whispered.

He shook his head slowly, his soft eyes watching me. “No. *I need to feel you,*” he said slowly, deliberately.

My heart skipped a beat, I forgot to breathe and just stared at him. *What?*

“That’s what you said to me back in Belarus. And I gave in... and I touched you.” His eyes closed momentarily with a deep breath. “I had one, long, unimaginably heavenly moment with your body.”

I blushed, brushing my hair behind my ear and lowering my eyes. “Yes... I remember.” My hopes were dropping again. He was going to tell me that it still wouldn’t happen. Not until Stepan was dead.

“My biggest regret is that I ended that moment.”

My eyes shot up.

Alek shook his head, taking slow steps toward me. “Stepan Koslov isn’t worthy of my regrets... I’m never, ever, going to let him keep you from me, ever again.” I could hear the mixture of anger and need in his voice. His eyes flamed with desire for me, and I couldn’t believe he was finally giving in to those feelings. He dropped his eyes as he reached my body and slowly took one of my hands while tucking his finger under my chin, lifting my face to his. “Isabel, I know I rejected you before... but I’m the one begging you now.”

His eyes closed and his jaw muscles flexed, before he took my face in both hands and looked at me with a deep anguish vibrating in his eyes. “Please, let me feel you again.”

“Yes,” I breathed out, barely allowing him to finish his sentence, and kissed him. The feeling was almost toxic, almost too much to take after years

of forgetting what this felt like.

He sighed into my mouth and let his hands drop to my hips, pulling me against his hard body. I let my fingers travel up his arms, tingling at the tips as they felt the curve of every muscle. Eventually, they slid over his shoulders and cupped his rough, unshaven cheeks.

We pulled apart, gasping for air, staring at each other.

“I missed you so much.” His head shook slowly as he said it, regret clear in his eyes. “I know this is wrong but it—”

“It feels so fucking right!” I ended his sentence for him as my mouth crashed against his again, feeling the sting of my cut lip but pushing through the pain because it was nothing compared to the passion I felt for this man and the urgent need to be completely with him, as close as was physically possible.

I pulled against his shoulders to wrap my legs around his waist. He held my ass with one hand and wrapped his arm around my body. We kissed all the way to the bed, where he laid me down and kissed my neck, pushing my hair—now washed and combed out—over my shoulder. I was already in my negligee and satin robe, so all he needed to do was tug at the belt, and it fell open.

He stood up and pulled his T-shirt over his head in one fell swoop, revealing the rippled topography of his large, beautiful body. I wondered if he spent all his time in Saint Petersburg working out at the gym because Christ! He was a big man. In every way.

I struggled to pull my robe off, to get my negligee off, and fall back with my heavy, post-pregnancy breasts bouncing. Aleksei stood back and licked his full lips, biting the bottom one until it turned white. I quickly remembered the worse-than-ever sweltering bruises across my ribs and my back, and froze up, attempting to hide them with my hands.

“Aleksei, please don’t get angry right now—”

“I’m not,” he said, leaning over me and letting his lips drag down over my breasts and down my stomach. “My anger doesn’t lie with you,” he murmured. “In fact, all I see right now is an invincible woman.” He brushed my hands away, and his lips pressed softly against a bruise. “A remarkable, resilient goddess who overcomes absolutely everything that’s thrown her way.”

He kissed the bruise on my other side, touching me so tenderly and so softly, I was on the brink of tears. I never truly knew that tenderness before.

But right on cue, as though he needed me with exactly the same intensity that I needed him, his hands grabbed my ass tightly, digging into my flesh as his kisses reached my lace panty.

“Take it off,” I begged. “Now isn’t the time for teasing, Alek! I need you!”

His smile spread devilishly, just like it had that night. He ripped them down my legs and before I could reach forward to get to work on his belt, he pushed my thighs apart, and I flew back again. His shoulders pressed against my thighs as he bent down and slowly worked his tongue through the slit of my pussy.

“Ah!” I breathed out, trying so hard not to be loud. “Alek—”

“Shhh.” He made the sound with his lips against my clit. I didn’t even know if it was intentional, but the light breeze of his breath hissing through his teeth sent a surge of need deep into me.

“I—” I tried to whisper as he rolled his tongue around my clit. “I... Oh, God, Alek, I want to see you!”

He chuckled deeply and stood up, licking his lips. I pushed up and undid his belt, tugging him toward me while he brushed his fingers through my hair and watched me with soft adoration. I managed to get his pants open and pulled everything down, exposing him to me entirely.

He stood with his long, girthy dick pointed straight at me. I must have gulped audibly because his quick laugh was proud and excited and happy, all in one sweet, low sound. My eyes lifted to his, looking through my lashes as I reached out and wrapped my warm fingers around his hot, hard cock.

“Wow...” I said softly and licked my lips before reaching forward and placing them around the tip. Aleksei sighed, still touching my hair and brushing his fingers over my cheek as he let me explore. This wasn’t to get him “ready”—the man was hard enough—it was all for me. To claim the big dick that I’d dreamed of for so long. That I’d only ever seen the outline of or felt push up against me with our clothes like a solid wall between us.

I’d only gotten him halfway into my mouth with a few strokes before he stopped me.

“Isa, baby, I can’t take much of that... It’s going to push me over the edge way too soon.”

He kicked his shoes and pants off the rest of the way before crawling over my body, but I pushed against him and rolled him over, lifting my leg over his and straddling him with my ass—somewhat more plump than the last

time he'd watched it bounce on stage—practically cuddling his balls between his widened legs, with his dick pressing into my stomach.

I ran my hands across his chest and leaned forward, letting my breasts press down against him as I whispered, “I know you were the one to beg this time, but I can’t help myself, I’ve never been the one to take a man, to claim him and his body... and all I want now is to do that with you.”

His happy smile spread, that rarely seen dimple deepening in his cheek, a trait I was sure not many people knew about him.

“Claim away, baby. I’ll get my turn.”

*Shit.* That was hot. It was a promise that this wasn’t only the first or only time, but the first of many nights like these to come. We were playing a dangerous game, but soon enough it would be just us, with no one standing in between.

I pressed my lips down against his and moaned into his mouth, opening up to deepen the kiss as his cock dug into my stomach and slid against my dripping pussy, making me tremble with desire.

His hands wrapped around my waist and pulled me closer. The heat of his body intensifying the already raging fire in my veins. I could feel my heart racing and my skin tingling.

“Fuck.” I broke the kiss and sat up, guiding him to my entrance that ached with need. He groaned and shifted closer, pushing his pelvis up and I felt the tip of his length throbbing against me. I gasped and pressed down, and felt him slide inside, inch by inch, until he was completely inside me. His mouth hung open, and his breath was hot and heavy as his eyeballs rolled back.

A loud, guttural moan escaped his lips. He opened his eyes and fixed them on mine in perplexity as the fire surged between us. “Yes, Isabel... Fuck” he moaned.

I knew he was feeling the same intensity of emotion that I was, both of us overwhelmed by our connection. His hands reached out, seeking mine, and when they found them, he squeezed tightly, as if to assure himself that this was real.

His breathing was ragged, and his eyes closed again as he let out another moan. In that moment, suspended in time, our connection was more powerful than anything either of us had ever experienced.

I gasped a deep breath and held onto his shoulders. He was stretching me and seizing my body as his, even when I was the one who’d wanted to claim



him. I figured that by the look on his face, I already had.

I took another moment to feel him inside of me and convince myself this was real, by swirling my hips slightly and feeling his cock press into corners of myself I'd never felt before.

"Jesus, Isabel!" Alek whispered loudly, gasping as his hips lifted of their own accord.

"This is just," I leaned forward and pulled my pussy up, to begin slow movements up and down, "so difficult to believe... That it's finally happening."

As I moved, I ran my hands up and down his chest, feeling the warmth of his skin and the strength of his muscles as I continued my movements. I closed my eyes and savored the sensation, feeling each movement as a reminder that this was real and that I was finally living my fantasy.

"I know baby," he said, looking up at my body slowly pumping his dick.

"No, you don't," I whispered against his ear, finding myself grinding down against him—a move I'd never done before. "Aleksei... I wanted you from the moment I saw you."

"From behind that curtain?" he asked breathlessly, squeezing his fingers into the flesh of my hips as I rocked forward and backward.

"Yes!" My answer was mixed in with my pleasure.

He put his arm around my back and flipped me over. I was desperate enough to keep him inside me that I quickly wrapped my legs around his waist and landed on my back with him suddenly pushing deep into me.

"Isabel, I wanted you at that very same moment." He ground his teeth together and fastened his movements into me. "I wanted to go behind that fucking curtain and stop you from getting on stage." His breathing became raspy, while I bucked my hips up to meet his smooth motions. "I wanted to take you home and make you mine!"

"Fuck! Alek!" I felt myself blooming from within, but this wasn't just sexual heat, this was like a burst of happiness from my chest at the same time. "I love you!" The words left my lips before I had time to think, and I was filled with an overwhelming sense of joy and relief. The warmth in my chest seemed to spread through my body and I felt light and alive. I looked into Alek's eyes, and I knew that he felt the same.

"God, I love you too." His mouth collided with mine and there was no more talking.

His grip tightened around me as he let out another moan, and I felt my

body quiver in response. The sensation of pleasure heightened as I felt my muscles contract around him and my orgasm built up and peaked. I could feel my heart racing and my body tingling with pleasure as I surrendered to the moment.

His every thrust felt like an explosion of pleasure, and I watched in awe as he moved with a skill and finesse that was unlike anything I had ever experienced before. His passion was palpable, and his intensity was electric as he moved in and out of me with increasing urgency. I could feel his body spasm as his orgasm intensified and then finally, with one last shudder, he released himself into me.

Our bodies hardly disconnected at all that night. Just as we began to drift to sleep, we would wake up with the intention of getting him dressed and back to his own room. But once we felt each other's warm bodies slide up against one another and realized that no one and nothing was waiting on us except the sun, we reconnected in hazy, warm, entirely love-filled sex.

I'd never known anything like it.

“SO THAT’S WHEN HE FINALLY MET US, RIGHT?” IVAN ASKED.

Of course, I hadn't detailed the previous scene to my sons. But the memory of it made me blush, and I pressed my fingers to my cheeks to try and hide it as I continued my story.

“Yes, he really was back for good. He took his place as the head of security and worked hand in hand with the house manager, planning his guards' shifts around her and Stepan's schedules, making sure he had a pulse on everyone in the house. He was able to—when Stepan wasn't around—let me out of my room a little more. A lot of the staff and the guards respected him, and I think even agreed with him that I should have had more access to my children. So, I got to visit you guys a little more frequently, and we'd play outside or in your room, wherever we were safest.”

“I remember that.” Misha nodded.

“I remember Uncle Alek playing outside with us after you were gone,” Dmitry said, “When Stepan was either sleeping off his late nights or out with some—”

“Dmitry,” Misha said in warning, without looking his way. I smiled.

“Some *woman*. That’s what I was going to say.” Dmitry rolled his eyes and sighed.

“So... did you two fall in love then? At the Koslov house?” Maxim asked. I figured he wanted to know when exactly he was conceived, and I laughed.

“We fell in love way before then, but yes... I’ll admit, I wasn’t exactly faithful to Stepan during those months.”

## CHAPTER 22

# ALEKSEI



The boys Isabel had raised were energized and full of life, tiring the nanny out to the point where she actually begged me to find a way to have them visit Isabel's room for a while. Of course, I happily—and carefully—obliged. Only certain staff members were aware that I took it somewhat easier on Isabel than Stepan expected me to. But they kept their mouths shut, because they agreed that a woman—a wife and a mother—should not be locked up in her bedroom quarters at all times and kept from her children. Sure, she'd tried to steal his sons away, but this was just absurd.

It was clear that the boys, the two older ones anyway, Misha and Dmitry, were somewhat confused by the whole situation. And when she still had her bruises, they would carefully touch them and ask if it hurt, in curiosity and obvious care for their mother. Apparently, Stepan had made them watch some awful things, including her beating, so it made sense that they were not only confused but also concerned.

They didn't like it when Stepan came home. He tried to spend time with them in their room, give them what he deemed to be fatherly advice or, when their energy became too much for him, corporal punishment. Back then it was just spanking, maybe a smack across the face. That was nothing compared to what was to come for them. Stepan was a cruel bastard and my and Isabel's plan to get rid of him was a tricky one to conjure.

"We could stage a house fire?" Isabel suggested. We were strolling around the garden, heading toward a gazebo that had been overgrown and enclosed by greenery. Truthfully, I already knew it was where many of the staff met up for secret hookups. I had to keep my ears tuned to any approaching footsteps on the grass.

“Where he’s the only one out of all the staff and family that’s caught inside the house? I don’t know...” I said doubtfully.

“Doesn’t he have a first cousin or something? Someone we can bring in to help us and then take over the throne?” She thread her finger around the leaves as she entered the small, shaded space.

“Not that I know of. I only ever met his father... And I think, if there was someone, they’d have already tried to get to that throne.”

She weighed her head from side to side. “Fair enough... and other bratva families?”

“What, like Sorokin?”

“Yes, he’s powerful. Wouldn’t he be interested in a plan like this? I can always use the next dinner or event to whisper into his ear.” She lifted a brow, almost seductively, and I no longer liked that plan.

“Perhaps,” I replied in a low tone, as I approached her back and touched her hips. “But truthfully, baby, I just want him gone. I don’t want a war... I don’t want to live in this place anymore... I want him to disintegrate into dust.”

Isabel laughed and leaned back into me. “I know, but you said it before. We’ll never stop running. My sons are the Koslov heirs, even if they had no idea about it, someone would come looking for them one day even if just to kill them off. To make sure they aren’t a threat.”

“I hear you.” I nodded, as I slid my hand down over her dress, to run my fingers down the middle of her ass, teasing her with the threat of pushing even lower, between her thighs. “But I don’t want to listen right now.”

She giggled and turned around, kissing me passionately. She was on her tippy toes, and I picked her up to sit her on the steel gazebo railing. I still had to lean down to kiss her, but at least this way she could wrap her legs around my thighs, and I could slide her dress up her legs.

“I don’t know how I lived without you, Alek,” she whispered when I drew my kisses down between her breasts.

I lifted up again and looked at her. “I know how.” I kissed her mouth and she laughed.

“How?”

My lips drew up her neck and behind her ear as I explained. “You thought of me every night... You remembered how I licked your sweet pussy raw and pulled the best orgasm you’ve ever had right out of you with my fingers.”

“Oh, God... yes... yes, that’s how I lived,” she said drowsily.

“Did you touch yourself, baby? Thinking of me?”

“Yes,” she breathed out, I looked at her bright red face and smiled. “Alek, I would dream of you so often, of your body between my legs, and then I would wake up and touch myself, imagining it was true.”

“That’s my girl.”

IF I THOUGHT OUR REUNION WAS GOING TO BE THE PINNACLE OF BEING WITH Isabel again, I was proven wrong. After the loving and sweet yearning touches came the raw lust. We knew we loved each other, we knew that we didn’t care anymore that she was married to Stepan, and we knew that with me as his head of security, we had a pretty good chance of not being found out.

So we fooled around whenever and wherever we could. I couldn’t go to her room every night; it was too risky, and I often had to be on duty in the security room during the night, at least until Stepan came stumbling back from wherever he’d been drinking or sniffing drugs from strippers tits.

But during the day there were chances when we could be alone without suspicion, even if it was while I “escorted” her from the boys’ playroom back to her room. We’d crash into an unused guestroom, every surface covered with sheets—since not even the maids would enter those rooms—and we’d fuck in any position that was fastest.

*Yebat’...* It was hot. Sometimes I’d turn her around to lean with her hands against a wall, pull her jeans halfway down her thighs, get onto my haunches, and lick her out with a soaked tongue before pulling my rock-hard dick out and sliding all the way into her.

Other times, after I’d provided her with a secret copy of her bedroom key, she would slip out in the dead of the night and meet me. The kitchen was a good spot since the guards only patrolled the outside of the house at night.

There, I took her to the furthest, darkest corner, and pushed her hands above her head against the wall, attacking her full mouth with a deep, soul-capturing kiss. She kept them there while I let my hands drag down over her tits, wrenching her clothes down to let her nipples pop out and into my mouth.

“Yes, baby...” she moaned quietly.

My fingers, after pinching those tight, hard nipples, dipped under her dress and into her soaking wet pussy.

“Hmmm,” I growled against her mouth. “So fucking wet, Isabel.”

“You do this to me,” she said in a weak voice, dropping her hands to my shoulders and lifting her leg to wrap around my hip. “Now make the most of it and slide into me. I’m begging you.”

I clenched my jaw and yanked her body up against the wall, kissing her as I held my dick in place and let her fall onto me. She came after a few strokes deep inside her, and she was so magically tight around me, I couldn’t help but be fast to finish also. It was convenient though, given the circumstances.

ISABEL, WHILE I WAS IN SAINT PETERSBURG, HAD BECOME THE STRONGEST woman I’d ever known. She explained to me the ways she’d protected her boys from Stepan, back before she was imprisoned, by taking the blame for their naughty behavior rather than letting him try to discipline them himself. She admitted to having stashed a lot of money under the floorboards of her bedroom. She had specific knocks against her door for Lev or for the maids that could be trusted, to know when Stepan was gone or on his way back.

Most other women would have given up after the first few beatings and cowered before his raised hand, but she stood up and took it, with her boys behind her back. I heard this from not only Lev but some of the house staff as well. She’d never let him steal her flame or her absolute will to live her life on her terms, no matter what circumstances she had deal with.

Some nights since I’d been back, she would be let out of her little prison to hang on Stepan’s arm at some fancy event. On one particular evening, she wore a floor-length black dress with long sleeves and a low backline. It reminded me of her wedding dress, only this time, I was going to make sure that I was the one to slide the dress from her milky body.

Before walking out, she sidled past me and lifted a shoulder, speaking softly. “What about poison? Sorokin will be there tonight; it could be so easy to pin Stepan’s death on him.”

I narrowed my eyes, lifting the corner of my lips in a smile. “Too easy. Too merciful.”

She smiled and nodded. “Too true.”



I had so much respect for her strength of character as well. Not only was she now cheating on Stepan with me—causing her to have to keep yet another secret from him—but also kept her abusive home life a secret from the rest of the community. Some of these events, such as this one, I would join in as their personal guard and see her work her magic on the wives or even the secret girlfriends. She knew not to create enemies, and she knew not to accept bullshit either.

Later in the evening, she disappeared through the doorways toward the powder room. I saw one of the lustier husbands look around, and then head in the same direction. As I rounded the corner, I heard him speak in hushed tones. “Isabel Koslov, apparently you used to dance for a living.” This was a particularly handsome, charming, and successful associate of Sorokin’s. He thought he could get away with anything. “What if I told you I wanted to see you dance... on my—”

By the time I got there, he’d already suffered a hard knee jab to the nuts and stood quivering against the wall. I wondered how many women that kind of line had actually worked on. Probably a handful, judging by the sound of his confidence.

I smiled, and when Isabel turned her look of wrath onto me, it melted away. I winked at her, a gesture to show that I was proud of my girl. She blushed and continued on toward the ladies’ room.

Later that night, Stepan came to me with a gaggle of drunken men following behind him and told me he’d be out for the night. “Get my wife home,” he said sourly, then lowered his voice and added, “and locked up again. Maybe even in the basement.” He burst out into laughter, so drunk on whiskey that his own delusional cruelty was a joke to him.

All it really did was send me right into Isabel’s bedroom behind her, and only then, locking the door. I’d have said that his behavior made it easier to do what we were doing, but truthfully, I felt no remorse for that *d’yavol* at all.

I slowly stripped her of the black dress, running my lips down her bare shoulder. “So, I heard that you used to dance for a living...”

She giggled and slapped my shoulder softly, turning around as the dress dropped and revealed her body clad in only a sexy strapless black bra and lace thong. “Baby,” she said, pushing her hip out to put her hand on it and tip her head to the side seductively, “I’ll dance on your dick anytime.”

I smiled widely. “Oh, yeah?” I took her hand, helping her step out of the dress since she still had her heels on. “Come prove it, my sexy stripper.”

I led her to the couch in her room and sat down, pushing back with my legs wide apart. She had a defiant smirk on her face and said, “You know, somehow when you say it, I feel proud of that part of me.”

“Oh,” I held out my hands, gesturing to her body, “you should; you were the best of the best, and I only ever got one dance.”

Her eyes sparkled with excitement at that memory, and she turned into a blushing, lip-biting seductress. She waved her hips from side to side playfully, then turned around and rolled her ass up for me. I reached out and slid my fingers into her thong, right along her pussy lips, stroking her slowly. She stopped dancing and leaned forward against the coffee table with a lusty sigh.

“Oh no, you keep dancing, baby. Only this time, I’m going to touch you every single way I wanted to that night.”

## CHAPTER 23

# ISABEL



“Misha, honey, slow down!” I laughed, feeling the wind brush my hair as he sped past me in the playroom. I had Ivan in front of me, on his back on a blanket, laying under a wide stand of colorful hanging toys, swinging his arms toward them and laughing when I blew raspberries against his adorable little feet. Dmitry was right next to me, both of us lying on our stomachs.

“Mama, look!” he said excitedly every time he’d added a Lego to his little pile of construction. I could already see his personality blooming; he was growing into somewhat of a perfectionist with all the same colors piled onto each other, each little “building” its own color. It was excellent mind work for a three-year-old, and I felt so impressed and proud.

Misha was swishing his sword around in the corner now. He’d recently been watching all of the most popular animated movies on repeat, many of which included sword fights. At five, he was extremely perceptive and able to grasp the storylines, which meant that Vanda, the nanny, and I were sometimes ordered to act as villains and be struck to pretend death by his plastic sword.

It was clear to me that he was the perfect big brother. Passionate about not just fighting, but about fighting for the protection of those who needed it. The movies instilled that in him, and I sincerely hoped he would remember that throughout his life and not be tainted by his father’s less-than-honorable reasons for violence.

Right on cue, the door to the playroom swung open and Stepan walked in, looking red in the face with rage.

“You!” he sneered at me, pointing and walking closer.

“Vanda,” I quickly said, and she stood up from her armchair where she’d been reading, to take all three kids to their bedroom. “Misha, take Dmitry’s hand and go with Vanda.”

Misha had already stepped closer to me, his knuckles white as he squeezed his sword tighter and watched his father. I took his shoulder and nudged him toward Dmitry, who looked at me with wide eyes and held onto Misha’s hand with both of his. They were worried. It wasn’t too long ago that they’d watched Stepan nearly beat me to death. Vanda had to pull Misha’s other hand, forcing him from the room.

I stood up from the floor and faced Stepan head-on, wondering what the hell was wrong. He’d been ignoring me completely since my deceit, so this was a surprise.

“Stepan, whatever this is, can we take it downstairs, please? The boys don’t need to hear it.”

“Oh, the boys, the boys, *the boys!* They’re all you care about, but you’ve got it wrong, bitch.” He walked right up to me and grabbed me by the throat, lifting me onto my toes as he spoke with his teeth clamped together. “They are none of your fucking concern. Not anymore. I should’ve gotten rid of you the moment I got *my* boys back, but no, I decided to be fucking patient!”

He threw me to the ground, and I gasped for air.

“Stepan, what is going on?”

“Oh that’s the question of the day, isn’t it?” he shouted. Pacing the room, he kicked Ivan’s toy stand away and pointed at me. “I know all about your little affair!”

*Fuck! No, no. Where is Aleksei?*

“Apparently, you’ve been seen creeping around the corridors at night, you fucking *shlyukha*. And I know exactly who gave you the goddamn key.”

I stared at him in fear, for Aleksei. Was he already dead? Tears sprouted in my eyes, and it all but confirmed Stepan’s accusations. He shook his head, laughing bitterly. “No denials, huh? You really are a fucking skank.” Suddenly his hand waved across the air and backhanded me across the face. His thick ring immediately sliced my cheek open, and I saw the blood drip onto the kids’ playroom carpet. I also heard some crying from down the hall, definitely Ivan, but possibly Dmitry as well.

“No... no,” I started angrily, pushing myself up from the floor and charging toward him. “You won’t do this to me anymore!” I shoved him on the shoulders and he laughed, enjoying it. “You don’t get to come home and

traumatize your children like this! It's not right!"

"Not right?" he asked with a wide smile before it dropped to a menacing stare as he took my arm and turned it over, walking me backward until I was pressed against the table. "Sleeping around like a *prostitutka* is what I would call, 'not right.'" He pushed harder and we both heard the snap of my bone.

"Aaah!" I yelled. Adrenaline kicked in and I surged my knee up, hitting him in the balls. When he bent over, I kned his face, breaking his nose.

He crouched over in pain, spilling blood from his nose across the carpet all the while laughing maliciously. I ran out and headed for the stairs, holding my broken arm to my chest. "Vanda, lock the door!" I shouted over my shoulder, making sure Stepan wouldn't go back to fetch them, and Misha wouldn't try to come after me.

When I got to the bottom of the stairs, two guards stopped me, holding onto my upper arms with serious faces as I kicked and screamed to be let free, not even feeling the pain in my arm due to the shock and adrenaline coursing through me. I didn't really know these guards; they were bratva soldiers Stepan liked to have protecting him when he went out, not house guards.

At the top of the stairs Stepan appeared, blood dripping from his nose and down his chin, but he didn't care. He watched me with a look I couldn't say I'd ever seen before. I knew his evil smirks very well by then, but this one... He looked almost satisfied. Like he finally had reason to kill me, like this was all going his way.

"Let's go downstairs, boys."

They carried me down into the basement, the very same place he'd made my sons watch as he killed a guard for laughing alongside me.

Once there, they shoved me down onto my knees, where I sat sobbing with my broken arm cradled by the other. I looked around and didn't see Aleksei. But I did see another guard, the one who usually took me for my supervised garden walks, strapped to a chair and already beaten so badly, his one eye couldn't even open. His name was Sergio.

"What..." I said in confusion, looking around. "No, no Stepan you've got it wrong!" I wasn't going to out Aleksei as my lover, but I wasn't going to let this innocent man be killed because of me. Not again. I stood up and was shoved to the ground again by the two guards while Stepan walked over to him. Once again, there was a table loaded with torture tools, and he chose a long, thin knife.

“No!” I screamed, crying uncontrollably.

“Look how you defend your sweet, sweet lover.” Stepan spoke slowly and shook his head in disgust. “I mean, I should have known that marrying a stripper would bring this kind of betrayal. I knew back then already that you were a filthy whore only looking for the attention of rich men, and I’m willing to bet you’ve fucked all my associates too. That’s why they look at you the way they do. They all know you’ll fuck them for free just to gain an ounce of their interest.”

“No, Stepan,” I shook my head. “I didn’t, I promise you I didn’t—”

“Oh, shut her up.” He waved a hand, turning away.

One of the guards punched me in the mouth, splitting not only my lip, but I felt my teeth dig into the flesh inside. I was in so much pain, but I kept my eyes open, dreading what was to come.

“I want to be a little more creative this time, you know?” Stepan played with the knife as he spoke to the guards, and they chuckled. “Here, how about this.” He placed the tip of the long knife under the guard’s chin, aiming to push upward. “I think this will be interesting.”

He shoved it up and I screamed. The knife pushed through the guard’s mouth, opening his jaw, then continued pushing further up, without a doubt puncturing his brain. Sergio stayed alive for a few moments, choking and writhing, before his whole body sagged with death.

“No,” I sobbed quietly, falling forward to the floor.

“Heartbroken, huh?” Stepan asked, walking over to me with a fresh knife. This one was shorter, with a gleamingly sharp edge on one side. I continued to sob against the floor, but he kneeled down behind me and picked my body up. I cried out in pain and anger, trying to fight him, but he had a tight grip across my chest.

“You know, I would have tortured you as well. That’s how much I fucking hate you,” he spat viciously into my ear. “But I can’t stand another second of your fucking incessant whining and crying and screaming and sobbing! I don’t deserve to have you annoy me anymore, you whorish *suchka*.”

I felt the knife slip across my throat. I felt the floor hit my face. And then I felt... nothing.

“*O BOZHE MOI...*” MISHA SAID.

“Jesus!” Ivan dropped his face into his hands.

Dmitry sat forward with his jawline flexing angrily. And Maxim, he stood up to leave the room for a moment. Of course, out of all my sons, he was the closest to me, not only throughout his childhood but in adulthood as well. This was difficult for him to hear.

“So he did it himself? That doesn’t fucking surprise me,” Dmitry finally said, his voice seething with hatred.

“He told us you’d died in a shootout, that you were collateral damage when Sorokin came after him,” Misha said.

I shook my head. “At that time, he and Sorokin were still friends. I heard that some business deal or betrayal had made them enemies, but it certainly wasn’t my death.”



## CHAPTER 24

# ALEKSEI



“Alek!” Lev shouted into the phone. “What?” I asked, turning the steering wheel with one hand while holding my flip phone to my ear. I’d been out to meet up with some potential guards Stepan wanted me to interview. He said they were bratva blood, cousins of cousins... whatever. They hadn’t shown, so I was already on my way back.

“You’ve got to get here right now!”

“I’m almost there. What’s going on?”

“It’s... it’s Isabel...”

“What? What did he do to her?”

“Just get here!”

I shouted, “What the fuck is going on?” But he’d already put the phone down. I smashed my hand into the steering wheel and sped up, flying up the driveway and screeching to a halt. I couldn’t see the town car Stepan used these days; he must have left. That fucking bastard knew that I would put a stop to whatever it is he did to her! The cunt sent me on a fucking goose chase!

As I crashed through the front door, Lev ran up to me, pointing toward the basement door. “He—he told us to clean up the mess... That you would know what to do, I—I don’t know how to say this, Aleksei!” He stopped me. “It’s bad, Alek... It’s real fucking bad.”

I pushed past him and sped down the steps, where I saw a gaggle of our house guards standing around looking frazzled, some running their fingers through their hair, others staring in silent shock.

First, I saw Sergio, the guard from the garden, tied up in a seat with a

long knife tucked through his head from the bottom, gruesomely keeping his mouth wide open. His eyes were still open too, but he was very much dead.

I frantically looked around and saw another body. This one had long black hair spread across the concrete floor, a dark blue dress tied at the waist, and a pool of blood seeped into that silky hair.

“Isabel, Isabel!” I shouted and crashed to my knees beside her.

Lev, not wanting this moment to be entirely public—though I assumed the guards already knew about my “soft spot” for her—ushered them back up the stairs, telling them that I would come up with a plan and call for help. He added that it wasn’t healthy to stay and stare at a comrade in such a condition. God, he was such an intelligent kid.

With shaking hands, I lifted her up, resting her head in the crook of my arm and her back across my knees, wrapping my other arm around her waist.

“No... no, no, no!” I felt hot tears burn my cheeks as I looked at the long slash across her neck with blood across her entire chest, neck, and in her hair. Her eyes were closed.

“What the fuck happened?” I shouted, knowing Lev was still behind me. I could hear his own silent sobs.

“Apparently, he—he thought she was sleeping with Serg.”

My eyes widened. So this was my fault. I fucking knew it! All along, I’d known that I would be the cause of her death. That just one touch from me would result in exactly this!

I rocked my body back and forth with her in my arms, dropping my head onto her chest. “No... I should’ve been here... Fucking hell, *I should’ve known!*”

Her body hung limp in my arms while my chest tightened up in a way I’d never felt before. It felt like I couldn’t breathe, and I thought, *that’s right... take me with you, Isabel, baby. I don’t want to breathe anymore if you aren’t breathing too.*

When my head sunk against her chest, I felt it. Her lungs. Very slightly, her chest lifted, then sunk back down. It was almost imperceptible but my heartbreak had me clutching at any modicum of hope. I quickly held my fingers to her wrist and felt the faintest beat. I could have been imagining it but there was no way I was going to give up on that tiny chance.

I sat up and looked at Lev, whispering, just in case anyone was still close by. This was her chance to get out, if she survived it, and I was going to make sure that Stepan had no idea about it. “Lev, Lev! I can feel her breathing.

She's still with us. I need something... something to stop the bleeding!"

Lev's face became alive with hope, his eyes buzzing around the room. "Here," he quickly said, as he pulled his jacket off. "Use my thermal."

He pulled his white thermal undershirt over his head and handed it to me. I moved fast as I wrapped it around her neck, hoping to apply enough pressure to the cut to stop any more bleeding, but not crush her windpipe at the same time. Peeking up the stairs to make sure we were alone, Lev quickly put on his button shirt and jacket again.

"He must have just sliced the skin open, without cutting into her trachea," I said to him. "Now, we're going to wrap both of them in those tarps, and we're going to put both in the trunk. But as soon as we're out of eyesight, you pull over. I'm going to make sure to keep her alive in the backseat until we get to someone who can help her." I looked up at him. "You hear me?"

"Yeah!" He nodded as though it was obvious, we needed to get her out of this house. Dead or alive, she wouldn't be coming back.

The guards watched solemnly as we carried out the bodies. We'd asked two of them to come down and take Sergio's body, while we carefully carried Isabel's, making sure to keep her top side elevated. We lowered them into the large trunk of the hummer and got in.

As I passed one of the guards, I ordered him to let Stepan know that we were sorting it out, that we would be taking the bodies into the forest. Whenever we burned the bodies of our victims, we needed to be in an isolated area. This was to ensure that no one would see the smoke or smell the burning flesh, and that no evidence would be left behind to link us to the crime. Stepan would assume that was my intention, and it was, but only for one body. The other, I would be saving. No matter the cost. If I had to burn the fucking cut closed myself with a red-hot knife, I would do it.

When I had her in my arms in the backseat, holding her head up, I sparked an idea.

"Lev, you know the Stars Hotel downtown?"

"Yes," he said quickly, looking into the rear-view mirror.

"Let's head there. If I'm not mistaken, that old apartment building next door is still an illegal clinic."

When we arrived, Lev banged on the door. The place was dark and quiet, but I told him to persist. Soon enough, the door opened a crack, and a man's eye peered out.

"What?" he asked angrily. I couldn't hear much from the backseat, but

Lev spoke with him quietly, clearly mentioning my name as I'd told him to, because the man opened the door wider and looked toward the car. He came to the window.

"Aleksei, it's been years!" You'd think he was saying it happily but alas, this man wasn't one of my friends. "Why you showing up here asking for favors now? What do I owe you?"

"Everything. Since I haven't yet told Stepan that you're still operating after he told you to get the fuck out of the city and never come back. Once I do, I think that might just ruin things for you a little bit, no?"

He hissed in frustration, looking away in thought, before looking back at me. "What? What do you want?"

"Save her. And don't tell a fucking soul. If this gets back to Stepan, I'll make sure to mention your name before he slices my neck too."

He scratched his head and groaned. "Fine!" He looked around, making sure no one was watching, then nodded and walked over to open the clinic door. Lev came over, took hold of Isabel's legs, and we carried her inside.

Within the hour, the illegal doc nodded, washing his hands and drying them off. "She's alive," he said. "Barely."

I could only hope his clinic was hygienic enough for her to not end up with complications. Though, at least he wasn't performing surgery on her, like he did many other patients. Abortions, even organ or limb removals—whatever the fuck people were willing to give up to the black market for high prices. All Isabel needed was stitches and to make sure that she had no other major internal injuries, though we wouldn't know for sure until she woke up.

He'd done exactly that, and given me a stash of illegally obtained medications to help with her recovery, before practically shoving us out of the door. We weren't willing to hang around anyway, there was a beloved dead soldier in the trunk and we needed to get out of the city as soon as we fucking could.

The drive to my father's old hunting cabin was only an hour, but the sun was rising by the time we arrived. The place was dusty and breezy through old cracks and broken windows, but it had enough to get us started. Firewood, a bed with mattress, a closet stacked with blankets, and thankfully, a hoard of tools.

Lev took the long ax and ventured out to find enough wood for us to burn Serg's body while I pulled out the planks from half of the porch to patch up the cabin and its broken windows. Isabel was already inside, on the bed that

we'd shoved closer to the fireplace. It was warming up, and so was she. She'd lost a lot of blood. I had no idea if she would make it through the next day, but I had to hope.

We stood in silence as we watched Sergio's body burn on a large stack of branches. It would take a while, so after a respectable amount of time and prayers, I spoke to Lev, without looking his way.

"We'll go back to the house. There won't be much I can do for Isabel for the next few hours anyway... and we need a solid looking plan. When we get there, I'll act as though I'm needed back in Saint Petersburg, that some emergency needs my attention. Then I'll come back here as fast as I can and you," I turned to face him. "You will never speak of this again. Do you hear me? We burned two bodies in the forest, we waited until only bones were left, and we scattered them."

"Done, boss," he said, still watching the embers of his friend's body glowing and hissing.

"I'll work on a proper grave for him while I'm up here."

He turned to me, with a shimmering look of respect in his eyes.

"Thank you."

## CHAPTER 25

# ISABEL



I woke up with a glowing red light flashing at the end of a dark tunnel. I could feel my body move, but only slightly as I stared at the red glow and tried to reach for it.

*Where am I?*

“You’re alive.” I heard a voice. A deep, comforting voice.

*Who is that? Where am I? Why... Why can't I say anything?*

The red glow flashed brightly when I squinted at it. I realized my eyes had been closed. I struggled to pull them open, seeing the light through each strand of my eyelashes. It was a fire, bursting with little sparks as it ate through the logs underneath it.

“Isabel?”

*Aleksei?* I tried to speak again, realizing that my mouth was moving, but not a sound was coming out of my throat.

“Shh, it’s okay. Save your energy. Just look at me.”

When I moved my body again it pained everywhere, but it moved. My head turned and my arms pushed away the blankets that constrained me. Finally, I saw him. Alek was seated on the bed beside me, his knees toward the fire, but his warm hands clasping mine.

“You’re alive,” he said again as his face came into focus. I couldn’t believe what I was seeing... Aleksei Chernoff, at my bedside, a warm fire, a quiet cabin. I figured this must have been heaven but he kept telling me I was alive. He had that smile across his face, that special one that no one else knew. His dark hair was ruffled and his cheeks unshaven. My gaze connected with his, remaining there.

*Those eyes... those dark, tiger’s eyes that said so much when he said*



*nothing at all. His gaze was filled with emotion, conveying his feelings with a single look. They seemed to pierce my soul, and I once again, felt that powerful connection between us that transcended words. I felt safe and understood in his presence.*

I felt hot tears prickle my eyes and I reached out my hand to touch his face. He held it there, kissed it, not once breaking our connected gaze. He spoke with a gentle voice, comforting, but serious. “I never gave up hope, but still, it’s a miracle. You’re here, alive, with me.”

I tried to reply, to tell him that I didn’t give up hope either. I couldn’t remember much, but I remembered fighting, in the dark of my subconscious, screaming from pain and anger but holding on because I could hear his voice. Now, here he was, still coaxing me back to life. However, I couldn’t speak. My throat was so dry, any attempt scraped at it like metallic shards. I began to panic but Alek shifted closer, pulling my hands from my neck where I felt tiny pricks. Stitches.

It all came back... The blade slicing across my skin. The fading image of Sergio’s body as I fell over and saw my own blood puddle around me. At that moment, I thought of my sons and I prayed for them. That they would be stronger than I ever was. That they would see a true monster a mile away, instead of being fooled like me. I prayed that they never turned out like their father.

Now, I cried, pushing up in the bed and falling forward into Aleksei’s arms. I couldn’t wail, there was no sound, but the tears streamed down my cheeks and my chest heaved with sorrow. He held me, and he shared the pain with me.

THE FOLLOWING DAYS WERE DIFFICULT, BUT BITTERSWEET. I WAS AWAY FROM my children but I knew that with this opportunity—Stepan truly believing he’d killed me—I couldn’t step foot back into that house to see them. But it also gave me the chance to not only be alone with Alek, but be *with* him.

He took care of me so diligently, making soup over the little gas stove, creating a straw out of an old pen so I could drink water more easily. He made sure that I was able to stand up to add logs to the fire or get myself a drink before he made the long drive back to the city to buy more food—

anything I might find easy to swallow—water, coffee, and whatever else the cabin needed. He fixed the light fittings, the windows, and the porch, which he'd apparently torn up to keep me warm inside when we first got here.

He told me everything that happened after Stepan slit my throat. He told me that he was supposed to be in Saint Petersburg, attending to some fake emergency there. But Stepan wasn't stupid. Apparently after Lev had told him Aleksei was gone, he'd muttered, "That sentimental pussy." He told Lev that Alek never had the bratva blood in him. That his joining them was a cruel twist of fate, because now that his loyalty was unending, Stepan valued him too much to kill him for everything he'd seen.

"He's right," Alek murmured, looking into the fire with me cuddled within his arms on the couch. We'd moved the bed back to the corner of the cabin again, since I didn't want to lie down anymore. I wanted to sit here with him, and talk. For the first time, we could talk without fear of being overheard.

"It was a cruel twist of fate. But now I'm thankful for that..." he kissed the top of my head. "Because it led me to you."

"He was right about the sentimental part too," I said jokingly, and his chest moved my body as he laughed.

"Okay, enough of that." He pulled me up and I twisted my body around until I straddled his lap. He brushed my hair away from my face and looked at my neck. "You're going to be wearing that pretty necklace for a long time."

I tried to laugh without it hurting, "You mean a scar?"

He nodded, chuckling. "Too soon?"

"Yes!" I pushed against his chest and he grabbed me by the waist, pulling me against him with a soft smile.

"You're so beautiful, no one will even look down to see it."

I watched him in the dim light, running my fingers through the hair at the back of his neck. "Why did you never say things like this before?"

"When?"

I shrugged lightly, "When I was a dancer. When I fell in love with you, but you were just... a statue."

He sighed, his hands never stopping, always moving across my body. "Trust me, baby, I was thinking it. But if I said it... If I had let you know how I truly felt, you wouldn't have left me alone."

I rolled my eyes, speaking sarcastically. "Okay, Casanova..."

He chuckled, pressing on. "Seriously, if I'd have admitted to falling for you, we would have been inseparable. Kind of like we are now." He looked down at our bodies, pressed together no matter which position we were in. "And this," he dragged his finger across my neck, careful to not touch the stitches. "Would have happened a long time ago. Before you had the chance to have children, or plan your mother's funeral, or see Greece."

I swallowed carefully, hearing his words loudly, even though they were spoken so softly. I sighed and leaned into him, wrapping my arms around his neck. "I still would have liked to hear it back then."

He laughed, pressing forward to kiss me. "You're beautiful, baby," he whispered against my lips. As he continued the kiss, he lifted me up and walked us over to the bed. "You are incomparable... stunning... sexy." Every word was whispered into my mouth, between soft, pressing kisses.

When we reached the bed he sat down, lowering me onto his lap. "Am I making up for it?"

"It's a start," I smiled, then reached out to lift the thick blankets and crawl underneath, where he joined me. Our bodies came together, intertwining so effortlessly.

"It feels selfish of me to say, because I'm so far away from my boys, but I am so happy right now."

"Yeah?" He asked, kissing my cheek and my neck. "Why's that, Isa baby?" His voice was growing deeper, challenging me to be honest.

"Because I can take my time with you now..." I kissed his lips and rolled over onto him. "And I can scream your name out loud..." Slowly, I sat up and pulled my clothes off, undressing him too. The cabin was warm from the constant fire but I kept us huddled under the covers, loving how normal it felt to share a bed with him.

"I can't believe I spent so many years without you," Alek said, his hands running down my sides and touching my bare hips, wider and softer than they were before I had any children, but he seemed to love it. I pushed down onto my elbows so my breasts were pressed against his wide sculpted chest and pulled my long hair over to one side.

"Me neither. But we're together now." I kissed him, gradually swaying my hips so I could run my quickly-building wetness against his already hard cock.

"Forever, baby," he said softly, moving his hands around to hold my ass firmly and pull me down against him.

“Forever,” I whispered, so convinced it was true. I would get my sons back somehow, but at least I knew I had Aleksei for life.

I lifted up and bit my lip as he guided his dick along my wet slit and pressed between my pussy. I remained there, penetrated by him, and kissed him slowly. I felt a wave of pleasure sweep over me as I adjusted to his size. He felt so good inside me, and I moved with him, finding a rhythm that increased in intensity as our passion grew. We moved in synchronization, our breath’s short and shallow.

“I could burst just from the pulsating of your perfect pussy, baby,” Alek said, trying to hold still but clamping his teeth together in restraint.

I giggled, “I can’t help that you feel so good inside of me...” Then began to pull up and push back down, rolling my hips in slow circles as I did so.

“Jesus, it’s like you’re dancing for me while I’m inside you,” he groaned, sliding his hands up and cupping my tits, thumbing my nipples.

“Oh Alek,” I answered, “I was always dancing *for you* baby... imagining what this would feel like...”

“You did?” He asked, licking his lips. “While you were on stage?”

I slid my hands forward to lower myself onto his body again, grinding my body and my clit down against him. His hands moved down my back as I spoke. “While I gave you that lap dance... While I was on stage... While I was waitressing, I was always wanting to do this with you.”

“Fuck, Isabel...” He groaned, pushing up, deeper into me. “I never thought your body could be mine.”

“It is now, Alek, it’s all yours.” With that, he rolled us over and plowed into me. “Ah!” I released loudly.

He sat back on his knees and pulled my leg up against his chest, sliding his hand against my white skin and kissing my calf against his shoulder. I pushed up and hooked my leg over his shoulder, angling my hips so he slid even deeper into me.

“Fuck,” he groaned, starting a rhythm with his hips until my body was bouncing against his. Every part of me wobbled, mostly my boobs. I watched his eyes study my body with admiration, before they flicked up to mine with a fiery gaze.

He felt so good pumping into me, my fingers began scrunching up the sheets and my back began to arch, as I felt the burning desire burst out from inside me. “Yes! Alek!” I called his name out loud, louder than ever before.

With a growling moan he gave into the moment and leaned over me,

putting his hand against the wall for leverage so he could surge into me with every ounce of adrenaline he had in his big, beautiful body. “Aaah, Isabel!”

He came into me. As I floated down from my climax, I watched him buck and shiver from his. I didn’t even want him to pull out, so I dropped my leg and pulled his body down against mine. His weight was nearly crushing me but I held him there, kissing his cheek, his neck, and his shoulder as he throbbed inside of me.

“I love you so much,” I whispered.

“God, I love you, forever,” he replied.

“I STAYED IN THAT CABIN FOR ABOUT THREE MONTHS. IT WAS WEIRD, LOVING such a small and rudimentary home after living in that mansion for years. It felt safe and intimate, compared to the long, silent corridors of the Koslov house.”

“Weren’t you scared someone would find you out there alone?” Dmitry asked, looking broody and doubtful. It was clear that Stepan had gotten to him the most. While Misha was cool headed and Ivan hopeful, Dmitry always seemed angry.

“Yes, I was. There was one day I heard a gunshot and panicked. I killed the fire, shut all the blinds and hid under the bed. I listened, and I heard voices far down the hill. A second gunshot, then no more after that.”

“Was someone else being buried out there?” Ivan asked.

“No,” I chuckled. “It was just hunters. I peeped through the blinds and saw two men carrying this huge elk far away. With the white snow, they were hard to miss.”

“Wow... that’s hectic PTSD to have.” Misha nodded sadly.

“Yes, well,” I shrugged. “It helped harden me to become the woman I am today.”

“The woman who left her kids behind to build an empire?” Dmitry asked.

I quietened, then leaned forward against the table and spoke softly. “I missed you boys every day. Alek had to be at the house with you most days but he came back on the weekends and told me everything you’d all been up to. I’m truly sorry it had to be that way but, I also hope you understand that Stepan would have killed me had I come back.”

“Yeah, of course we understand that,” Misha replied, giving Dmitry a dirty look. “We want to know the rest. How did you end up in Saint Petersburg? Why didn’t you return when Stepan was dead?”

“Well, in the cabin I quickly realized I was pregnant.” I smiled, looking at Maxim whose eyes shot up to mine. “And no matter how warm and safe the cabin felt... It was no place to raise a child. So, Alek sent me to live with his brother in Saint Petersburg.” I looked down at my fingers. “He didn’t want to. He didn’t want to stay in Moscow and be away from me and our son but he had to... Because even if he did convince Stepan to let him return to the Saint Petersburg bratva, people would have seen him with a family. Word would get back to Stepan. Stepan would have wanted to meet us... There were just way too many risks.”

“Why didn’t he visit? Just once? Why didn’t he want to meet me?” Maxim asked, looking pained.

“He did, my love.” Maxim’s eyes widened at my answer. “You won’t remember but, in the first few years of your life he managed to visit in secret and hold you in his arms. But as soon as you turned five, we agreed that you shouldn’t know him as your father. It was the most difficult decision he’d ever made; I’ll promise you that.” I started to tear up, quickly wiping at my eyes because it felt selfish to claim heartbreak after everything my sons had been through. “But he wanted you to grow up without missing him. To have a father slip in and out of your life, as a child, it’s tough to understand. You would have been hurt over and over again every time he left.”

“Just like you two were, your whole lives.” Misha said quietly.

“Yes.”

## CHAPTER 26

# ISABEL



When I arrived in Saint Petersburg, Gregori was awaiting me at the train station. I realized it was Aleksei's brother because his eyes had the same shape and his nose had the same curve to it. The glaring difference, however, was how he carried himself with so much ease and charm. He was leaning with his shoulder against the wall, looking handsome in an expensive suit with his hands stuffed in his pockets, while smiling at a young lady passing by. She was on the arm of her husband, but he didn't seem perturbed by that.

I shook my head and approached him. "Gregori?"

He stood up straight, smiling widely. "The famous Miss Isabel." He held out his hand with a polite nod of his head. "Wonderful to finally meet you."

"Likewise. Alek told me a lot about you."

"Uh-oh," he muttered.

"But he didn't mention how similar you look. It was easy for me to spot you."

"Oh, God." He rolled his eyes and took my bag from me. "We are nothing alike, I can tell you that now."

"I believe you."

At his surprisingly large house—for a bachelor, anyway—he settled me into the wing that he said was Alek's while he lived here. It was perfect, my own space with my own key. It was like Alek had turned it into his own house, one room a lounge with TV, another his office, then of course the main bedroom and, soon enough, I turned the fourth room into Maxim's bedroom. It felt right, like Alek existed there even when he wasn't.



I immediately set myself to work. Before I left Moscow, Alek and I sat down to discuss the future. We agreed that we would find a way to bury Stepan, no matter how long it took. We just had to be crafty about it.

“Don’t trust Gregori, no matter what,” he told me. “He might seem friendly now, but he’s still got that selfishness in him, he’ll still fuck anyone over if it will get him what he wants.”

So, I used Alek’s old office and began my plans. I contacted a man named Igor from a list Alek gave me. I was never to give my true name to anyone, but I was free to do business under a false name. Alek tried to talk me out of it; he didn’t want me involved in the bratva world at all, in fear it might not only alert Stepan that I was alive but also that it might, very easily, take my life.

All I did was slide my fingers across Alek’s cheek and say, “Baby, I’ve seen enough, and I’ve been through enough to handle this world. Nothing is going to stop me from finding a way to have Stepan killed, so I can get my sons back.”

With a scar across my neck and a baby in one arm, I slowly became the queen I was always meant to be.

“STARTING WITH IGOR, I DEVELOPED A DRUG PEDDLING RING OF MY OWN. And that wasn’t just for the money, of course, but to get closer to Stepan’s business, if I could beat him at his own game, I could weaken him.”

I looked around the table, all of my sons waited with expressionless faces for me to continue.

“I never met with anyone myself, not while Stepan was still alive. I used Igor, with my scarf wrapped around my neck, hiding my scar. He was the head of the team of men on my payroll and handled the distribution of the drugs.”

“Your supplier was Martin,” Dmitry said, his eyes narrowing in question. He knew the answer, he’d spoken with Martin not too long ago in Saint Petersburg when he was looking for me.

“Yes. He was still young back when Aleksei found him and turned him into the drug lord you know him as. You see, when Stepan sent Aleksei to Saint Petersburg it was to set up a new bratva family there, under the Koslov

umbrella, and begin making profits on drugs without the transport costs. It was Aleksei who found Martin through the street runner boys he used, one of them being Lev. He struck a deal and soon enough... Martin was a rich man. An associate of the Koslov bratva ring, their main supplier.”

“So, you offered him better prices,” Misha said, nodding his head, his cool mind immediately knowing what my plan would have been.

“Yes.”

“Where did you get the money?”

“Well... There were two revenue streams. First, I had Aleksei not only stealing from Stepan and channeling it to me,” All four of them snickered at that, Dmitry releasing an uncharacteristic laugh. “But also collecting the stacks of cash I’d hidden around the house during my years there. It got me set up. But when I needed to start cleaning my own profits I began a few shell companies, jewelry stores, specifically, worked quite well. Once Gregori realized what I was doing, he sent a queue of clients my way.”

“But I thought you couldn’t trust Gregori?” Maxim asked. He was still sour about the fact that his uncle had fooled him. No doubt he was angry with me for not listening to Aleksei. The truth was, I liked living in the Chernoff home. It kept me close to Aleksei in spirit and it was Maxim’s inheritance, since Gregori fathered no children that we knew of.

“I didn’t. I just dealt with new clients that happened to use him to cook their books. Since they were all rich men with wives and mistresses, the large payments for diamonds that didn’t actually exist were easier for Greg to hide,” I said this for the Koslov boys’ benefit. Maxim already knew the workings of my and Gregori’s businesses.

“Slowly but surely, I infiltrated Stepan’s bratva ring. I stole his men by offering better salaries and benefits. With double agents in the Koslov ring, I made sure to buy out Martin’s supply before they could. It nearly crippled his business.”

## CHAPTER 27

# ALEKSEI



## *Ten Years Later*

I was walking through the entry hall at the Koslov house when Stepan arrived home, high as a kite and stinking of booze. With the cocaine giving him energy, he approached me.

“Alek!” His eyes were red as the *d’yavol*, and he spoke faster than usual. I couldn’t believe he’d let this drug get the best of him. Couldn’t he see that it made him look weak? He lost all pretense of a cool demeanor when he was high. “We’ve got business to deal with, and this time, I’m handling it myself.”

“What do you mean?”

He leaned in with a wicked smile, “I feel like getting my hands dirty for once. It’s been too long since I had blood dripping from these fingers.”

I looked up the grand stairs and saw three pairs of eyes watching from the darkness.

“Alright, get in the car, I’ll talk to the guards and be right out.”

He bashed the doors open and disappeared outside, eager to get going. I turned around and walked up the stairs. At this point, Isabel’s sons were almost all teenagers. Misha was 14, Dmitry 12, and Ivan 11. My son, Maxim, was 10. Sometimes I felt like all I could do to be near to him was be near to his brothers.

The ruse Isabel and I had worked up—that she was dead and we weren’t

secretly in this long-distance relationship, working to ruin Stepan from the inside—had gone on way longer than either of us expected it to. It turned out it really was difficult to build an empire and try to take another down at the same time. Stepan’s drug use didn’t just take away his calm composure, it made him a cruel, impulsive bastard. More so every day, we had to be careful with the moves we made, or we’d end up being the cause of the death of many of his and our men. That would make us no better than him.

It seemed tonight Stepan’s cruel impulsivity was taking over again and I had to make sure the collateral damage was minimal.

“Hey, boys. What are you doing out here? Get back to bed,” I told them quietly.

“What do you think he’s going to do?” Misha asked, looking down at the front doors with silent anger.

“It’s none of your concern, now—”

“It is!” Misha retaliated. “I’m almost fifteen! It’s time I knew what the family business is about!”

“You’re not fifteen yet,” I said, placing my hands on my hips. “Besides, even then, you won’t be invited to these kinds of parties until you’re eighteen, so get back to your rooms.”

“Can we play video games in our gaming room instead?” Ivan asked. He wasn’t oblivious to what was going on. I figured he didn’t want to be alone, since seeing their father in such a state brought back memories the boys didn’t want to remember.

“Sure,” I replied, moving down onto my haunches and touching each of them on the shoulder, showing them the love I knew their mother wished she could. “Just keep it down, don’t wake your nanny up.”

Misha took Ivan and they walked away to the game room, while Dmitry stood with his hand curled around the stair’s balustrade. He was staring down at the entry hall, the look on his face undecipherable to me.

“Hey,” I touched the back of his head. “Forget about him. Go play games, and when you go to bed, you know what to do?”

He lifted his eyes to me. “Lock my door.”

“That’s my boy.”

STEPAN'S DRIVER PARKED THE CAR OUTSIDE OF AN APARTMENT BUILDING. IT wasn't a good area, there were lurkers and dealers hanging on the corners, but they all worked for us.

"What did this guy do?" I asked, checking the chamber of my handgun.

"He's a distributor. He's five months behind on his payments."

I nodded, knowing what that meant. Usually, a distributor—who provided dealers like the ones on the corners with their parcels—could take a little while to get his payments in, what with dealers themselves being unorganized scaly cunts. But after a few months, it would be close to impossible for the distributor to catch up. The money might as well be written off, because no amount of beatings was going to make that money magically appear. It was time for the distributor to become an example.

"I only want Alek with me on this visit," Stepan said to the driver and bodyguard in the front seat. "You boys sit tight and keep the engine warm."

We walked up to the apartment door, watching as corridor dwellers scattered when they saw us, audibly locking their doors. Stepan was in no mood to knock, so he merely gestured for me to kick in the door.

I did so. Immediately there was a scream, a woman. The distributor I recognized as one that I'd had to deal out a warning beating to about three months ago. He shot up from the couch and told his wife to get back.

I stood aside for Stepan to walk in, already feeling sick to my stomach about what was about to happen. No matter how many years I'd been with the bratva and how many deaths I'd seen, it never got easier for me.

"Well, well." Stepan looked around the room while the man trembled in his kitchen and his wife backed away into the small lounge. "Look who owns a nice little home, filled with appliances and nifty gadgets when he still owes me money."

Stepan punched the man so hard he crashed into the kitchen cabinets and fell to the floor. He pulled out his gun and immediately shot the man in the head. I closed my eyes for a moment, then opened them to see a fast-growing pool of blood around the unmoving body.

The wife cried out with tears streaming down her face, then put her hand over her mouth and doubled over in heartbreak.

"Aw... It's okay *meelaya*..." Stepan approached her, setting his gun down on the counter. "I'll make it all better. Alek, wait outside."

"Stepan, this isn't a good idea. You've made an example of him. That's enough."

He swirled around in red-hot rage. "I'll decide what's enough!"

I bit my tongue and gave him a long hard look before stepping into the corridor and closing the door. I stood with my hands folded in front of me, watching as the blood of the example seeped out from under the door.

I could hear his grunts as he had his way with her. I heard small sounds of protest from her, muffled and contained, as though she didn't want anyone to hear. I found it weird, surely any woman would be devastated right now. Why would she worry about what her neighbors heard?

"Alek!"

I opened the door and stepped over the man's body. Stepan was buckling his belt, staring down at her body hunched over, sobbing quietly.

"She wasn't much fun," he said in disappointment. "Give me your knife." I stood motionless for a moment, not wanting to assist in taking her life. "I said—" Stepan started again, but I cut him off.

"I fucking heard you."

I pulled the blade out of my jacket, something I always carried in case of close combat, and handed it to him. He grabbed it, leaned over, and picked her up from behind, holding her by the chin to expose her neck. I watched her, still wondering why she was silent, then followed her tearful eyes.

Right as Stepan sliced her throat and blood splattered across the room, I noticed the little boy peering through the bedroom door. His eyes were on his mother, his own tears streaming silently down his face. As Stepan retrieved his gun and walked out, I lifted my finger to my mouth.

"Shhh. Close the door. Stay there," I whispered. The boy's chin wobbled, but he nodded.

Outside, Stepan fell into the backseat, his energy drained after having his way and accomplishing his task. I closed his door, then went to the driver's window.

"Take him home, I've got to clean up here."

"He's an example, Alek!" Stepan groaned from the backseat. "Don't cover this up!"

"She wasn't, boss. I'm going to make sure you don't lose any more respect in this community."

"What was that?" Stepan asked angrily, but I spoke to the driver.

"Send Lev to fetch me."

The driver nodded and drove off quickly. Of course, Stepan was his boss, but often when Stepan was this out of his mind the men preferred to listen to

my cool-headed decision to just get him to his bed.

I walked back into the apartment and approached the bedroom door. I knocked gently, slowly opening the door. “Don’t be afraid.”

I saw him huddled behind the bed, crying into his arms. He must have been around eight-years-old. “My... My mama!” He cried.

“I know, son, I know.” I approached him and gently touched his shoulder. “I’m going to take you to a safe place, okay? But you must promise to close your eyes.”

He looked up at me through his tears, deciding whether or not to trust me. I guess he felt he had no other choice, and stood up. I picked him up and set his head against my shoulder, then walked outside to the dismal patch of lawn. I set him on his feet and crouched down in front of him, holding his shoulders to look into his eyes. “Tell me, do you have a grandmama? An aunty? Someone who will look after you?”

Slowly, he shook his head, not meeting my gaze.

“*Yebat’*,” I said under my breath, and turned to see Lev pull up. I wasn’t going to clean up the boy’s mother’s body, that was a ruse. I only wanted to get this poor kid out of there. It seemed we’d have to leave him at the fire station, since he said he had no other family. Maybe they would find his family for him.

I picked him up again and walked to the car. “What’s your name, kid?”

“Elijah.”

A FEW DAYS LATER STEPAN CALLED ME INTO HIS OFFICE. HE SAT WITH A vodka in hand, wiping his brows to soothe a headache. I’d always known it, but after seeing the heartbreak in that kid’s eyes and knowing the trauma he’d be living with for the rest of his life, I was ready to kill Stepan myself with a swift shot to the head.

I was never supposed to be a *bratva* man, but I knew it meant more than this. Stepan’s father told me it was about loyalty and honor, about protecting communities that the law could not protect and providing them with jobs even if it meant drug distribution. It was all for the greater good.

Stepan didn’t share that philosophy. He was a selfish, greedy man, and he needed to be eliminated.



“Boss,” I said, closing the door. “You wanted to see me?”

“Yes... You know, Martin’s been fucking us over for a while now.” I remained quiet, knowing exactly why that was. “I’ve heard of this other bratva ring... And we’re going to find them, but for now, you’ll never believe the call I received yesterday.” I lifted an eyebrow in question. “A man who said that he is in fact Martin’s supplier; and he’s willing to cut out the middleman and supply me directly.”

I cocked my head to the side, wondering why this man would do that.

“Yes, yes...” Stepan nodded. “I asked him why the fuck he’d do that for me? What does he want in return?”

“And?”

“He said he’s always preferred doing business with the Koslovs, even if he’s never met me. It’s the principle of so much history together that fosters loyalty, and he doesn’t agree with Martin that the other bratva ring will be better for him. He plans to cut him out of the picture completely.”

“Okay,” I said, my mind whirring with thoughts about who this man could be, because he was obviously working against Isabel.

“I want you to go to Saint Petersburg and find this man. I need you to vet him, let me know if he’s speaking the truth. There are many reasons he would lie... So we need to be sure before we make any decisions.”

“Alright.”

I was almost out of the door when Stepan added, “He said something I liked... He said that he and I were more suited to work together without the interference of Martin because we shared something: money and power. He said, money and power are more fitting for a greater destiny together than anything else. Isn’t that beautiful?”

I froze, turning my eyes back to Stepan. My own father’s words played through my mind as a distant memory. *Life truly is ruled by the survival of the fittest. But don’t be fooled, money and power are more fitting for destiny than physicality.*

“Did he say anything else? Did he want to meet up?”

“No... he just said to let him know once I had my ducks in a row... then he’ll take Martin out himself.”

“I’m leaving right now.”

It was Gregori. It had to be. I knew the *svoloch* couldn’t be trusted! I tried to call Isabel but she didn’t pick up. I hopped on the Koslov jet—of course, Stepan wanted me to get this done quickly—and that was working in

my favor.

On the flight I wondered if Gregori was speaking the truth or just lying in order to take Martin's place. Could he really have been Martin's supplier all along? I thought back to when I set Martin up as our supplier, he led me to believe the supply was cooked by his friends. But that could have changed without me knowing. I lived in the same house as Gregori. The man was a sly fuck with many contacts. It was definitely possible.

When we landed, I still couldn't get hold of Isabel. I knew it was against our rules when it came to Maxim, but I went straight to the house. I had to get to her first, I had to warn her that there was a fucking snake in her house.

Only, before I could even knock on the door, I was knocked into darkness with a swift blow of something hard across the back of my head.

I WOKE UP FEELING COLD. IT WAS FUCKING FREEZING, AND MY HEAD PAINED unbearably. I opened my eyes and saw dark, damp concrete walls.

"*Chto za huy?*" What the fuck? I groaned, carefully touching the back of my head and seeing blood on my fingers. I looked around and realized I was in a goddamn cell.

"Ah! My dear brother has awoken." I heard Gregori's voice and looked up to see him in the cell with me. Only he was calm, dressed in a pinstripe suit, and leaning back against the wall with his hand in his pockets.

"Gregori, where are we?" I growled out, standing up with difficulty.

"Oh no, save your energy." He kicked me against the shoulder, sending me falling back against the opposite wall. "You'll need it in here."

"Where is *here*?"

He smiled. "Northern Russia, in a prison in the middle of nowhere."

"What? Why?" I raged, standing up again.

"Because I couldn't let you get in my way!" He shouted, his eyes bulging with anger now. "By God, I tried to get rid of you but you were just too attached to that spoiled Stepan Koslov! I tried to use you, tried to use Dima, I tried to infiltrate Stepan's bratva ring every chance I could but you!" He poked my chest. "You keep getting in the fucking way!"

I stepped closer to him, nose to nose. He was shorter than me, and skinnier. But as soon as I did so, a guard wielding an AK-47 stepped into

view outside the bars of the cell.

Gregori shook his head. “The bratva was always my destiny, Aleksei. Not yours. You took it away from me. You got to be the right-hand-man. You got to make the money. And then... You got the woman.”

My eyes widened. “You leave Isabel alone! I will fucking kill you!”

“I wanted to kill *you*. But I thought... no. Let me rather show you how it feels to be kicked out of a life that was supposed to be yours, and watch your brother take it all for himself instead.”

“No!” I threw a punch but the fucking weasel stepped back and out through the cell gate, smiling from behind the bars when they shut closed with a loud bang.

“I’ll come visit. Maybe... in a few years? When I have Isabel as my wife, Maxim looking up to me as a father figure, and Stepan owing me his entire empire. I’ll be the goddamn bratva king. Yes, I think that’s when I’ll come to rub it in your face, just like you’ve been doing to me for years, you selfish *podonok!*”

I roared with anger, banging against the bars and pushing my arms through to reach for his throat. The guard’s gun came from the side and slammed down against my arm, breaking the bone.

“Aaah!” I cried out and pulled my arm into my chest.

“Slither back into your corner, Aleksei. You’re done.”

## CHAPTER 28

# ISABEL



## *Five Years Later*

I stood at the window of my office, staring out over the perfectly groomed back garden with my cigarette between my fingers. I didn't smoke every day but, since I'd never developed a love for alcohol, it was the lesser evil on days like today.

It had been five years since Aleksei was killed.

I wore a knee-length black dress that hugged my body; with sleeves that ended at my elbows. On my feet were black Jimmy Choo stilettos and around my neck a red chiffon scarf that was swept over my shoulder and down my back. I pulled on the cigarette, releasing the smoke slowly out, not moving an inch.

I'd gotten the call from Lev. Aleksei was sent here, to Saint Petersburg, to find a new drug supplier—since we'd ruined his trust in Martin—and never returned. Within the week Lev was here himself, sent to work with the Koslov bratva to find him. They never did.

I spent the past five years searching for him myself, using the connections and man power I'd built up. I looked for the supplier he was supposed to meet. But nothing ever turned up. Gregori helped me. He was heartbroken over his brother's disappearance and while I kept him at an arm's distance, he'd been a comfort to both me and my son.

"Mama?" Maxim's voice sounded behind me. I turned around, looking at

my fifteen-year-old son and seeing the likeness of his father more than ever before. His black hair, his dark eyes, the cut of his jaw. At least the blood of Aleksei was still here, with me. “Are you okay?” He asked.

Of course, I’d never told him about his father. He believed that his father died when he was still a baby, so he didn’t know the significance of today.

“Yes, baby. Come here,” I said, holding my arm out. He stepped into my embrace. “I love you.”

“Yes, yes. I love you too,” he said, rolling his eyes with a smile. “I’m heading to school.”

“Alright. Be safe. You have your knife on you?”

Maxim looked back at me, “Yes, Mama. And I know how to use it. I just wish you’d tell me why I need it in the first place.”

I dragged on the cigarette, then put it out in the ashtray. “In due time, Max.”

I WALKED BETWEEN THE ALLEYWAYS IN SAINT PETERSBURG CITY CENTER. I wore a heavy coat, a thick cashmere scarf wrapped around my head and neck, with large sunglasses covering half of my face. I knew there were men looking for me. Men from the still existing Koslov bratva I’d been trying to eradicate from this city for years already.

Without Alek’s help, I didn’t know as much as I used to about the inner workings of Stepan’s organization. Lev gave me as much intel as he could, but without actually being in the Saint Petersburg ring, he didn’t know much.

There was someone here—their main supplier—calling the shots that I just couldn’t find. Martin no longer supplied them; he crawled away into a drug den and apparently hadn’t left since. I still used him as a supplier for my ongoing business, but it was no longer helping me weaken Stepan.

I looked up and saw the man I was searching for leaning against the alley wall and staring out onto the street.

“Hey, you,” I said.

He looked my way and smiled. “Oh, hello there, beautiful.”

“Come here.” I lured him into the darkness and like a hungry puppy, he came. He waltzed over, getting closer to me while I pulled my glasses off. This was why I’d chosen to do this particular job myself. Men became much

easier to fool when approached by a good-looking woman.

He looked me over and held his hands out to the sides, whistling like he was impressed. “I don’t usually deal to the elite, but I can help a dame when she needs it—”

I grabbed his arm and twisted him around speedily, just the way Aleksei had taught me long ago, then shoved him up against the wall. With his cheek to the bricks, he retaliated. “Whoa, whoa, lady! What are you, the fucking police?”

“No.” I pulled out my dagger and held it against his throat. “Tell me who you work for.”

He chuckled, “Hell no.”

I slid the dagger across his skin, drawing blood, then held the tip against his throat, ready to push it straight in.

“Okay, okay! Fuck! I’m a Koslov bratva man!”

“Who is your main supplier? Where do you get your parcels?”

“I don’t know his name! We pick up shipments from a warehouse! That’s it!”

“Where is the warehouse?”

“I’m not fucking telling you that! You’re that lady, the one running the secret bratva ring! I could be killed for telling you—”

“Oh yeah?” I quickly plunged my dagger into his shoulder, just inside of the collar bone. “Don’t bet on me sparing your life either.”

He screamed, writhing, but I had him in an armlock, stabbing my heel into his foot for good measure. “Fine! Fine! Shit!”

“Tell me.” I pulled the dagger from his shoulder.

He gave me the address and I let go of his arm. He turned around with his back against the wall, looking at me in bewilderment as I put my sunglasses back on and wiped my blade across his jacket.

“You’d better run, *priyatel*, your Koslov brethren will soon find out who spilled the intel.” One anonymous text message would see to that.

His eyes grew and he looked at me, looked at the busy street, then, holding his injured shoulder, he rushed behind the buildings instead, into the shadows. I hoped, for his sake, that he knew how to run and stay hidden. It wasn’t in my nature to kill men, but I would let the bratva manage their own men the way they saw fit, if it helped me.

I made my way to my office, AKA, a jewelry store on a bustling city street. It sparkled with real diamond jewelry lit up by warm lights and had

constant security. It was a real store, with real customers. I hid in plain sight, with business owners around the block only ever seeing me arrive or leave with a large hat or head scarf on.

On my way there, I moved in circles and zigzags in case the fucker followed me. He didn't. Once I was at my desk in my large and comfortable office on the floor above the store, I called Igor in, hoping to discuss a stake-out of this warehouse when the time was right. My men had been keeping tabs on the Koslov dealers so they knew when the shipments were handed out each month. We just needed to wait for that day, then attack the warehouse and find the supplier. Then, finally, I might draw Stepan out here to slice his throat myself.

"Bella," he walked in, looking out of breath and excited, using my fake name. "You won't believe it."

"I'm sure I will," I said, lighting up a new cigarette. I still had Aleksei on my mind, feeling the loss deeply because I'd never love anyone again. Other than my sons, he still held my heart and I left it with him. I needed to, in order to become the cold boss I was today.

"Stepan is dead."

"What?" I stood up from my desk. "How? Who did it?"

"No one knows." He shrugged. "All that the guys in Moscow know is that Stepan flew to New York with his sons, and only his sons came back."

My mouth hung slightly open, and a smile slowly grew. "Igor, go tell the men to stop following the Koslovs. We have no more reason to."

He frowned, "There will be a new boss, we should still find their supplier —"

"Just go!" I said loudly, leaning forward onto my desk. When I was alone, I scoffed in disbelief. "I don't believe it... They got him... My strong boys did it!"

They were still so young, only teenagers. I was worried they'd been brainwashed by him already and conditioned to live their lives the way he did. But it sounded to me like they rose up against him. I wondered how they did it. Did they make him suffer? I shook my head at myself. "They're teenagers, Isa..." I whispered. "They must be traumatized by something like this."

I had to get home and prepare. I called Lev on the way. "Lev, I heard the news!"

"Can you believe it?" He asked, hushed but excited. "The story is that he



was meeting with a new client, trying to spread business to America, and the deal went skew.”

“And what’s the *real* story?”

“Well, the boys won’t talk about it... But by the looks Misha and Ivan keep giving Dmitry, I’m guessing it was him. He got it the worst of all the boys. It wouldn’t surprise me.”

“Ah! I’m so proud!” I gushed. I pulled my neck scarf off, feeling free for the first time to show my scar and not be scared that Stepan would hear of it. “Do you think I could come there? Bring Maxim? Tell them the truth?”

“I don’t see why not.” Lev said. “I’ll keep it quiet, for now. You make your arrangements.”

“I will.”

When I got home, I found Gregori in his office.

“Gregori, Stepan is dead,” I said. His eyes grew in surprise. “I’m going to pack some things. It’s finally time to see my boys again,” I told him with a proud smile.

“Ah, yes!” He smiled. “What a surprise. Are you going to move back into the Koslov house?”

“I don’t know,” I said without a care. “I don’t know what the future holds, but I know that I can finally come out of hiding.”

That evening, Maxim wasn’t home yet when I was waiting in my home office to tell him the full story in person, that he had brothers, and that I was finally free of their father’s wrath. That I wanted him to meet them. I didn’t know how he would take the news; probably not well since I’d been lying for so long, but it was time to come clean.

My cell phone rang and I answered.

“Isabel Koslov,” the person on the line said, taking me by surprise. I straightened up in my seat, no one had called me that in a long time, not even Gregori dared to use my legal last name. I was a Chernoff now. Married or not. The voice was distorted and the hairs on the back of my neck stood up, I had a feeling this wasn’t a friendly call.

“Stepan Koslov is dead. The Koslov throne is up for grabs. I certainly hope you don’t think it’s yours to take.”

“It’s Misha’s,” I said sternly. “The throne is taken by the next in the bloodline.”

“Well, Misha is just a boy. He won’t get in my way. But you... You’ve finally survived Stepan, with an empire of your own to boot.”

“How do you know all this?” I asked. “How do you know I’m alive?”

“I am a man of power, Isabel. I know many things. If you so much as step foot into Moscow, not only will I kill you and your bastard son, but I will show your Koslov boys no mercy. The throne is mine to take and you won’t stand in my way. As long as you stay away, they might keep their lives.”

“No, I will not have you threatening my sons!” I raged, standing up, but the line went dead.

I stared at the screen of my cell phone in shock. *No, no, no!* Not after so long! Not when I was so close to being with them again! I dropped into my seat and tried to stop the burning tears from falling. I felt blindsided. For the first time in a long time, I didn’t know what to do.

“Mama, you wanted to talk?” Maxim came in.

I recovered quickly, blinking the tears away and shaking my head. “Ah, it’s okay, baby. You go to bed.”

He frowned; his typical teenage nonchalance clear in his cool demeanor. “You sure? You’ve been acting weird today.”

I gave him a smile as best as I could, “It’s been a weird day.”

## CHAPTER 29

# ALEKSEI



“In line!” The prison guard shouted. My cellmate and I stepped out into the long hallway next to the rest of the prisoners, holding our hands out to be shackled.

“Any news?” I asked the guard quietly as he shackled my wrists. His eyes lifted and he gave me a slight shake of his head. I was asking about Gregori, my weak and treacherous brother. He visited every few months and paid the guards bribes to be able to visit me in a private room, since out here in the middle of fucking nowhere, it wasn’t a usual thing to get visitors.

I hated seeing his smug face but whenever he came, he brought news. About Isabel, about Maxim. Even about the Koslovs and how fat Stepan had become. He explained to me in detail how he’d already supplied Stepan with so much cargo that the greedy bastard couldn’t refuse and now owed him money. He had his foot in the door, and it was just a matter of time before he had enough of a hold on everyone, Isabel included, that he could just take the Koslov and Chernoff empires for himself, creating one big interconnected web of a bratva organization across the continent.

I knew what that meant. He would have to kill off all the Koslov sons, Isabel, and Maxim, so that no one else could lay claim to his throne. With every visit, I grew more impatient to escape from this fucking hell hole and strangle him to death, to watch his eyes pop out of their sockets as the life faded away.

But until then, it was his visits that were my window into the outside world, the shred of hope that kept me from allowing myself to die when Gregori left and paid the guards another wad of cash to beat me to a pulp because he liked to watch.

“So, how’s that plan going?” My cellmate, Randa, asked when we were in the yard. The walls were high and thick, and the ground was covered with a blanket of snow. I lifted myself repeatedly from a concrete beam that ran across the wall, doing pull-ups while we spoke. It was better to speak out here where our voices were lost to the wind instead of echoed in the concrete hallways of the cell block.

“Not well,” I said grumpily.

“Even if we drilled a fucking hole through the wall where would we go? We’d die out there in the cold before we even made it anywhere near civilization.”

We’d tried to escape before by over-powering two guards in the middle of the night and making it as far as the entrance—where we saw the extent of our predicament. Hills upon hills of snow, rock, and whatever vegetation was strong enough to survive it. Security had spotlights on us before we could even try to run into the abyss. We each spent six months in solitary confinement after that.

“We’d need a ride,” I said, lowering myself down and wiping my freezing cold hands. With all the beatings I’d been getting, not only because of Gregori but because the guards loved to pick on the silent prisoners who didn’t cower before them, I’d made sure to keep my strength up. My shoulders were wider than they’d ever been, the skin hardened under the layers of scars. “It’s going to be difficult. We’ll need a guard on our side.”

“Can’t we do what we did last time, but take their uniforms and keys and just drive out?”

“No. The security at the gates checks their faces and IDs when they leave. They’re not that stupid.” I shook my head.

“How do you even know that?”

“I’ve got a guard informing me...”

“On your side?”

“Not quite. He just likes to let me know how fucked I am, and in the process, the idiot gives me information.”

Randa chuckled, shaking his head. “I know you’ll figure this out, Aleksei. I may not be the brightest man in this prison, but God somehow knew to lock me up with the man who is.”

“Randa... If I was bright, I wouldn’t have been put in here by my own brother.”

He scoffed. “That is true. Do you think he’s sleeping with your wife yet?”

I looked at him. I told him Isabel was my wife because in our hearts, she was. We could just never do it legally without her needing a divorce from Stepan. “No.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“He would have rubbed it in my face. Besides, my woman knows how to rip a man’s balls off. The longer he doesn’t show up, the more hope builds that she’s done exactly that.”

He laughed. “Fair point. Hopefully we can break out of here soon so you can kill him yourself.”

I sighed, “My wife thinks I’m dead. My son thinks I’m dead. If anything, that’s what’s making me more determined to get out of this place. I’m going to kill my brother, that’s for sure, but I’ll be escaping for them.”

## CHAPTER 30

# ISABEL



## *Ten Years Later*

Over the following years I searched for the man on the phone and tried my luck at meeting up with my sons. In the beginning stages I flew to Moscow secretly, but I was approached at the airport by a low-tier bratva man, and not a Koslov bratva man.

“If you don’t turn around right now and book yourself a ticket home, Maxim will bear the consequences.” He flashed his cell phone, showing a picture of Maxim in his school clothes, walking home. That meant he was being followed, and that meant this mystery man knew where we lived.

“Who is your boss?” I asked angrily, needing to know who was threatening not only my son and me, but the entire Koslov empire as well. He wanted it for himself, and the only way to manage that was to kill off the bloodline. The man just gave me a last warning look, then walked away.

I received a phone call almost immediately. The distorted voice said, “Just accept it, Isabel. You are not destined to know your Koslov sons. They’re growing up, almost all men now. Back off and stick to your own territory, until the time comes for me to take that from you as well.”

I killed the call and closed my eyes, feeling unraveled for the first time in a very long time. Since before I had this pretty necklace, as Aleksei called it.

Whoever this man was, he had eyes everywhere. He was obviously a bratva boss, with moles in both cities. But who? There were other families



with strong bratva bloodlines, but I couldn't go around accusing powerful people. I needed to pull back and reassess, get my own moles in the other families, do whatever I could to figure out who was planning the biggest takeover in bratva history.

My sons were strong. They'd grown up without me for the better part of their lives. No matter how badly I wanted to know them, it would have been selfish of me to put them in danger just to say hello. I heard about the rise of my boys. Misha was the new king, and I was so proud of him. Dmitry had moved to New York, and Ivan lived his life to the fullest.

Lev joined me in Saint Petersburg and with his and Igor's help I grew my empire still. I stopped messing with the Koslov bratva, and began phasing out my drug business altogether. I would stick with the money laundering; I would stay under the radar. Even when I felt like waging war against this ghost and calling his bluff, Alek's voice would flitter through my head and tell me to keep crawling, until the time was right to pounce.

I finally bought my own house. Maxim was becoming a man, and I couldn't stomach the thought of living in Gregori's house forever. Yes, it had parts of Aleksei in it, but it was like his smell had worn off. The heartbreak became too heavy.

Gregori tried to stop me from moving out, the poor guy even tried to woo me. I figured he'd just never found true love and felt like Maxim and I were the only family he had. But he gave me chills every time he touched me, and without even considering the fact that I didn't trust him, I'd never forgiven him for forcing Aleksei into the bratva life. I tolerated him, because Maxim loved him. He was the only other family Maxim had, for now anyway.

Eventually, ten years had passed in a flash but I kept searching, watching the enemies of the Koslovs and assessing their moves both in business and in social circles. Misha still had the throne, he'd lost his first wife, but I was glad to hear that he'd found the strength to move on. He had himself a new queen, and a stronger sense of family than ever before, with both brothers backing him up whenever he called.

Whoever it was—the man still sending me frustrating threats that were never carried out—he had to be on the inside circle. It had to be someone Misha knew, someone who was slowly gaining his trust. One name kept coming up, and I'd met him before, a long time ago, when I was still young and naive.

Yevginey Sorokin.

“I THINK THAT ABOUT SUMS IT UP, RIGHT UNTIL THE POINT I WAS TAKEN BY Elijah.”

Dmitry looked at me. “He *took* you?” He was still cynical, still thinking that I’d been blackmailed and weakly succumbed to Elijah’s will.

“Yes,” I nodded. “I thought it was Sorokin finally making good on his threats but it was someone else entirely, not the man who’d been calling me. This Elijah man... Aleksei saved him as a child.”

“What?” My sons asked in unison.

I nodded, my eyes glazing over as I recalled the last conversation I’d had with Aleksei. “When Elijah began his speech after abducting me from my home, I quickly remembered one of the last things Aleksei told me before he disappeared, because it was the breaking point for him. He said Stepan was out of it and killed a man that owed him money, then raped his wife. He didn’t see there was a kid watching from behind the bedroom door. Alek returned afterward and made sure the kid got to safety... He said the boy’s name was Elijah.”

“ISABEL KOSLOV, IT WAS DIFFICULT TO TRACK YOU DOWN, I’LL GIVE YOU that. But it’s funny how quickly names and addresses are given up when you find a friend in the enemy of your enemies.”

“My sons’ enemy? And who is that?” I asked him. He had me tied up in a hotel room. Even though Aleksei had saved him from being stranded, life had done him no favors. He looked rough and unhealthy with yellow, skewed teeth.

“Oh, I’ll let him keep his secrets... As I said, he’s considered a friend now. Isabel... Do you know who I am? Do you know what your filthy husband did to me?”

I gritted my teeth together. “He hasn’t been my husband for a lifetime now. Alek is my true husband. *Aleksei*, don’t you remember him? He’s the one who told me your story. About your mother, and about carrying you out of there.”

His eyes faltered and he frowned, but shook the thought away and started

a speech that I had no doubt had been rehearsed many times in his head.

“Then you’ll know why my revenge cannot be killing the Koslov’s themselves, but rather those they love the most in the world. I have reason to believe that’s not you, unfortunately.” He grinned devilishly. “But I know they are looking for you. You’ll be my bait.”

“You want me to meet with them?” I asked, beginning to wonder if this would be the best or worse thing that could possibly happen. If it was the mystery man that gave Elijah my details, surely, he would know about this part of the plan. He would know that my sons would finally realize I was still alive. How would that affect his plans?

“Something like that,” Elijah sat down and spoke cunningly. “We’re going to be sending out a few messages...”

“SO, IT WAS HIM THAT KILLED SONYA,” MISHA SAID GENTLY, AFTER I’D explained everything else Elijah said to me over those few days, about how insufferably long it took for the Koslov men to fall in love and how they protected their women with the force of an army.

I nodded. “I did everything I could to try and help you boys and your wives. I promise.”

“We know you did...” Ivan nodded, putting his hand over mine. “Well, we know now.”

“Why did you disappear again?” Dmitry asked. “Obviously you didn’t go home, or Maxi over here wouldn’t have come looking for you.”

“Well, the answer to my burning question was waiting just outside that church. The enemy who wouldn’t let me intervene with his plans—Gregori.”

“COME HERE, YOU FUCKING WENCH,” GREGORI SAID AS HE GRABBED ME outside the church, his black car and bodyguard waiting nearby. I was trying to run for exactly this reason, I knew that Elijah had ruined things for me. I could no longer lay low, the Koslov boys knew I was alive and would probably be seeking me out for answers. It was an alliance that the mystery man couldn’t allow.

“Gregori?” I asked in complete surprise. “What the hell?” I screamed, but he quickly shut my mouth with his hand and threw me into the car.

As we sped off, Gregori made his formal introduction in the backseat with me. “Hello, Isabel. Yes, it’s been me calling you all these years.”

I felt like such a fool. No wonder he knew my every move. No wonder he had such easy access to Maxim. We were living in the same fucking house! Even after we’d moved out, Maxim still spent a lot of time with his uncle.

“You fucking piece of shit *svoloch*!” I shouted, lunging forward to scratch his eyes out, but he grabbed me by the wrists and pushed me painfully back against the car door. “I knew I should never have trusted you!”

“Oh, Isa,” He gripped my wrists between one hand and touched my face with the other. “If only you’d have accepted my advances. We would be in this together! You’d be my queen, at my side!”

“I’m my own queen you fuck—”

“Yes, yes... you’ve had your fun, built your little empire. But you know what I’ve been up to? I’ve been supplying your fucking drugs all along. Yes. In fact, Stepan owed me millions of dollars’ worth of stock that he just couldn’t pay up because the weak *sucha* couldn’t handle his men well enough. Your idiot sons settled the debt once their inheritance paid out and cut ties with me, ruining my plans. I had to find a new one.”

I was silent for a moment. “So, you started working with Sorokin to get closer to them.”

“See? I knew you had the same business savvy I have. You’d have done the same thing, if only you weren’t a mother weakened by the biological bonds that your own sons don’t even give a shit about! I heard him in there! Dmitry hates you!”

I lifted my knee, swiftly knocking him in the stomach and forcing him to let me go. I tried to open the door but it was locked, and the driver was going full speed. Gregori laughed as he recovered his strength, then grabbed my head and knocked it so hard against the window that I saw blood and felt it stream down my face, before blacking out completely.

When I awoke, I was locked in a basement cell in Gregori’s home. Of course, I’d rarely ever explored his side of the house, especially not the basement. I didn’t realize he’d had it kitted out to imprison people, and if I had, maybe I would have realized that he was more than just a money laundering man.

“Ah, there’s my lovely Isabel,” he said as he walked around the corner,

carrying a tray of food, water, even coffee. He slid it through a hatch and gestured for me to help myself. I did not. “You starving yourself won’t get you very far, now, would it? Besides, I don’t want to torture you. I just want to detain you. See?” He pointed to the bed that had plush pillows and thick blankets, as though it would gain him empathy from me.

“Why detain me?” I asked. “Why not use me to draw the boys out? Isn’t that the plan?”

“In due time, *meelaya...*”

“Don’t—” I started to growl out, but reminded myself that he wasn’t Stepan. He was a different kind of evil. He used his charm to get his way, he even had Aleksei fooled the few years he’d lived here. Alek knew he couldn’t be trusted, but had no reason to cut ties because Gregori played such a smooth game. He was patient. He didn’t get distracted by drugs and cheap women like Stepan did.

“I don’t plan to use you, Isabel.” Gregori slid a chair closer and sat down. “I plan to trade you.”

“What?”

“You see, even with my contacts and my wealth—wealth I had to hide from you, by the way, so you didn’t realize I was up to way more than you were witness to—I realized that I couldn’t overpower the Koslov boys on my own. Especially now that I’ve seen what an utter failure Elijah’s plans became. And even if I do now have access to your empire, since I’ll be Maxim’s advisor, it’s not nearly as big and strong as theirs.”

“Enter Sorokin,” I said sourly.

“Precisely. Sorokin, with his *bratva* family is strong enough to attack them, but he needs leverage, bait, information, I don’t know. All I do know is that I now have you, and he wants you. When Sorokin is ready, we’ll make the trade.”

“And what would you get in return?”

“Well, the Koslov empire of course.”

My eyebrows drew together. “Surely not, surely he wouldn’t just hand over such a big empire to you—”

“It comes with conditions, of course. But the main takeaway is that he would have an ally in the Koslov throne. We’d work together, *blah, blah...*” He waved his hand in the air, clearly not planning to live up to these conditions. “But you, my dear, are the key to all of it. So, you rest up, I’ll have more food sent down later.”

He left, and I was locked down there for two whole months before it was my time to shine. He kept his word and I was well cared for, but as soon as I was needed, his guards wrapped my hands and feet up with rope, plastered duct tape over my mouth, and spared me no pain as they transported me to Sorokin's house.

“WAS THAT THE DAY WE ARRIVED?” MAXIM ASKED.

“No. I spent a few nights in that house, tied to the bed. Sorokin asked me questions about you but when I didn't, or *couldn't* answer, he grew bored and left me alone.”

“He found another way to draw us in,” Misha said. “Maybe he planned to use you against us in the future.”

Maxim's eyes narrowed. “But Gregori was still there... when we walked in, he was...”

“Yes. I don't believe his intentions were as merciful as they had been the two months before. Since I was technically no longer his, he became less gentle.”

“IT'S A SHAME, REALLY,” GREGORI SAID WHEN HE WALTZED INTO THE bedroom. “You and I could have ruled the bratva so well. But you could never let go of your feelings for my brother.”

I glared at him, full of hatred. I'd already come to the realization that it must have been Gregori who had Alek killed, or worse, killed his own brother himself.

“Oh well. I've been working too long for this. For years. Decades,” he said, sitting down on the bed.

“What are you doing here?” I asked. “You've made your trade.”

We heard a commotion downstairs and Gregori smiled. “Just making sure I get my end of the bargain. Oh, by the way, Maxim is marrying into the Sorokin family. It's a part of our new alliance. Looks like our boy will have to settle down now and behave.”

“He's not your boy, he's Alek's!” I spat at him.

“Well, then Alek will be pleased to know his son is moving up in the bratva chain.”

*What?* The way Gregori said that implied that Alek was still alive. My heart filled with hope, if he'd been merciful enough to keep me locked up, maybe that's what he'd done with Alek. Maybe Alek was in the house the whole goddamn time! For 15 years!

“He's... He's alive? What did you do with him? Where is he?” I asked, pulling at my ties as I tried to sit up and get closer to him.

But he merely smiled, too clever to give me any more than little bites of information at a time. Instead, he looked down and ran his hand up my leg. “Isabel, you already know what's about to happen. I'm going to become one of the most influential men in this country. Hell, on this continent. All you have to do is say yes, you'll be mine, and I will show you a life you've never known before.”

“Where is Aleksei?” I shouted at him, my tears starting to build. He was all I could think about. I felt ashamed for believing that he was dead. I should have had more hope.

“Nowhere nearby, I'll tell you that.” Gregori shrugged. “It's useless to try and find him. And truthfully, he'd probably want you to be safe, instead of killed by Sorokin. So, just say the word... and I'll be your Chernoff King...”

His fingers traveled higher, reaching my thigh under my dress. I turned over, trying to kick him off but it only made him laugh with excitement.

Suddenly, we heard gunshots ringing throughout the house. Gregori stood up and looked toward the door.

“I think we may have just heard the death of the Koslov bloodline, darling.” He smiled at me, but when the door was abruptly kicked open, he screamed and backed up, cowering against the wall.

My sons walked into the room wielding their handguns. Maxim was leading the pack and he looked at me tied to the bed, then at his uncle.

“Get her off that fucking bed, now,” Maxim growled.

Gregori held his arms up in surrender, inching his way to the bed with his arms raised. “Okay, Maxim. Calm down. It's me! Uncle Gregori!”

I realized that Gregori wasn't actually used to getting his hands dirty. He made calls, hired hitmen and laundered money, but he'd never had to wield a gun himself.

“I said get her off that fucking bed,” Maxim snarled, holding his gun steady.

Gregori pulled out a knife and cut the ropes that held me trapped. He backed up again as I scrambled off the bed and went to stand behind my son. I looked at Misha and Dmitry, trying to gauge their reaction to this development. They didn't know I was here, and they'd never known Gregori. All of them looked surprised, and Maxim the most shocked of all. He was realizing the full truth.

"Fucking traitor," he said, ready to pull the trigger, but quickly I placed my hand around the gun to stop him.

"Don't," I said, shaking my head and speaking in a low, controlled voice. "Don't kill him. I need him. Bring him home instead." I looked at Gregori with hatred burning in my eyes. "Once I get the information I need from him, he's mine to kill."

"Alright, we have her now," Dmitry said in irritation. There must have still been guards alive in the house, though I wasn't so sure about Sorokin himself. "Now let's get the fuck out of here."

In the car, Misha was driving us away from the house that was still booming with the sounds of shots aimed at us, while Maxim assessed me in the backseat.

"Mama, you're okay?"

"Yes." I nodded and touched his cheek, noticing Dmitry looking our way. "Gregori didn't hurt me, but he has something I need."

"What?"

"Aleksei."

All three looked at me with wide, dumbfounded eyes. Maxim knew that was his father's name, though he didn't remember much about him. Misha and Dmitry, on the other hand, knew him for many years.

"WE REALLY THOUGHT HE WAS DEAD," MISHA SHOOK HIS HEAD AT THE table.

"So did I..." I looked down, feeling angry with myself. "I'll be going home tomorrow to start working on Gregori. I don't care how long it takes; I'll get him to speak."

"You sure you don't need help?" Ivan asked, but Maxim smiled and answered him instead.



“Oh no, brother. This kind of thing our mother is fairly good at. There’s a cell in her basement for a reason.”

I smiled. It was true, as a bratva queen I’d had my fair share of prisoners. Just like that day in the alleyway, I preferred to get my own information. No wires crossed, no chances for double agents. I handled my own business, with Lev and Igor the only men I actually trusted. In a way, with Maxim included, we had created our own bratva family. The Chernoff bratva.

“I assume Lev is with uncle Greg now?” Maxim asked. I nodded, keeping my eyes on him. I hadn’t had much chance to speak with him about his feelings toward finding out his father was still alive, after all these years. He didn’t know him like I did, and after finding out that Alek had been in my and his brothers’ lives right up until he was ten-years-old, I was sure he was feeling apprehensive about it all.

“Wait.” Misha sat forward. “Lev’s been with you? This whole time?” Misha asked. It was him who’d released Lev from duty after Stepan’s death. Misha chuckled, shaking his head. “I told him to disappear.”

“Well, he did, didn’t he?” I said. “Only, he’s in my basement, probably wielding a blowtorch by now.”

They all laughed. “Look…” Dmitry started. “We loved Alek.” He looked at Maxim meaningfully. “He was a good man, and I think he would have made a great father. So,” he turned his eyes back to me, “whatever we can do to help find him, just let us know.”

I smiled, “Thanks, boys. I think I’ve kept you from your wives long enough. And the sun is approaching.” We looked out the window to see a faint glow on the horizon. “It’s time for me to get back home.”

## CHAPTER 31

# ALEKSEI



I sat in silence in the dead of the night, staring into the darkness of my solitary confinement cell. I hadn't seen daylight in about a week. I only knew it was night because I'd been keeping track of the sounds of the guards walking past the metal cell door. They passed every hour during the day, and at night, no one passed at all.

I was placed in solitary for hurting a guard. A week ago, we were in line up, our hands and feet shackled, and he'd been in my face. Teasing me, testing me, smacking my face to get a reaction, as he usually did. Soon enough, when he got closer, I headbutted him. He was out cold.

When the other guards struggled to pull me down the hall while the prisoners laughed and whooped, I gave Randa a look, and he nodded his head knowingly.

I'd been waiting every night, silently focusing on what was to come. Finally, I heard a noise. A guard with his keys jangling, unlocking the cell next door, then locking it again. Next, he unlocked mine, and I stood up from the bed. I saw his and Randa's faces. Dom, the guard, held his finger up to his lips.

Treading carefully, we snuck past the other cells, and passed by the night guard sleeping soundly at his station. Dom smiled—he must have found a way to drug him, judging by the proud look on his face—and led us to the artillery and vehicles warehouse. We had to be in solitary to be able to execute this plan without having to pass other general inmates who would no doubt make a noise.

In the warehouse we could speak, though still in whispers.

"We're so close!" Randa said excitedly.

Dom looked at me seriously. “You’d better make good on that promise you made me. Your brother is a wealthy man, most of us are on his payroll just to give you a hard time. You think you’ll be able to kill him?”

The deal was that I would kill Gregori and use his money to set Dom and Randa up for a life of running. I wouldn’t have to run, because I was only in the prison through bribe money. There were no actual charges against my name.

I looked down at my body, wider, harder, and stronger than it had ever been. Covered in scars, I didn’t think it was a pretty sight, but it sure had the potential to crush Gregori’s thin neck in seconds. “Have you met my brother?”

“No.”

Randa and I laughed together. He’d seen him once or twice when Gregori paid visits, he knew what a scrawny and jittery man he was. He jumped every time I moved. It was only his money that gave him power.

Fuck what my father said. This time, it was truly the survival of the fittest. Gregori’s money and power meant nothing to me, I would squash him like a fucking flea when I found him.

Dom shrugged, convinced by our cavalier attitudes toward that part of the plan. “Well then, I trust you. Here.” He threw us jackets and boots, scarfs and ushanka hats with ear flaps. It was fucking freezing out there, and we had far to go. “Get in.”

With the warm clothes on, we squeezed together in the back of an old army truck. The guard laid cloth over us, then balanced guns over our bodies, and covered them with another cloth. It was tight and uncomfortable, but it wouldn’t be for long.

We felt the rumble of the engine, and then the whoosh of cold coming through every little opening in the truck when he pulled out of the warehouse. After a minute of driving, we stopped at the gates.

“I’m off to town, *priyatel’*,” the guard told his colleague. “Boss needs more bottles.”

The outside guard laughed; it seemed the prison ward was quite the drinker. He opened the back doors, lifted the cloth, and saw the guns. We didn’t breathe. It wasn’t unusual for a guard to be armed to the teeth, even if only for protection from the rough wilderness, which was why he’d used this tactic. The guard closed the doors and walked to the front, sounding unbothered. “Be back by morning, or he’ll be kicking our asses before

breakfast.”

Our guard laughed too, and we heard the gates groan as they opened. Randa squirmed with elation, but I kept still. Not because I still feared we'd be caught, but because I couldn't believe we hadn't.

After half an hour of driving—Dom had to make sure we'd crossed the hill and was out of sight from the binoculars of the tower guards—the truck stopped.

“Yes!” Randa shouted with his arms in the air when he climbed out the back.

“Shut the fuck up, noise travels in these hills!” Dom hissed. “And it's not the guards I'm worried about.”

“Oh, right,” Randa answered and looked around the darkness surrounding us. Dom was talking about bears.

I climbed out and stretched my limbs. Still, I didn't smile. While I was relieved that I was finally free, I had no idea what I would find in Saint Petersburg. Would Isabel welcome me into her arms? Or would she have moved on by now? Would Maxim want to know me as his father, or have nothing to do with me at all?

I knew that Stepan was dead and Misha was running the Koslov bratva as a man now. I wasn't worried about them. Gregori had been an idiot to come and boast about everything every year or so, because now I had intel. I just hadn't seen him in many months, things might have changed already. If I couldn't find Isabel or Gregori, my next move would be to get to Moscow and let Misha in on all the little secrets Gregori held.

“Buckle in, boys. We have a long ride ahead of us,” Dom said.

With extra canisters of gas in the back for the long drive through the wilderness and nothing but our clothes to keep us warm, the three of us sat in silence shoulder to shoulder, hearing only the rumble of the engine and crunching of rocks, snow and sticks under the tires.

Seven hours later, the sun was up and we arrived in a small town far north of Saint Petersburg. This was where we would part. Randa would steal a car, Dom would take the bus, and I was to take the train. This way we were scattered and one wouldn't lead the police to another.

Dom provided us with as much cash as he had—to be paid back by me as soon as possible—so we could change clothes, buy food and pay for travel.

I bought cargo pants, a hoodie, and a parka. At a gas station bathroom, I washed myself and stared into the mirror. I was in my fifties, there were not

only age-lines around my eyes and mouth, but scars across my face. My skin was pale, and there were dark circles under my eyes. My hair was still short in a buzzcut, but it would grow back gray at the sides.

The train ride to Saint Petersburg was another six hours. I used the opportunity to get some sleep. I felt safe enough knowing that no one was looking for me. Unless, of course, the prison ward was angry about losing out on his monthly payment from Gregori, but he wasn't so stupid as to make his acceptance of bribes a national issue. The truth was, I felt safer than I ever had.

Stepan didn't own me anymore. None of the bratva did. I wasn't being tormented and tortured by prison guards. And Gregori—he had no idea what was coming for him.

In the city, I walked to Gregori's house from the train station and knocked loudly. With my fists clenched I waited, but a maid opened the door.

“Is Gregori Chernoff home?”

“No, sir... He hasn't been for a few weeks now.”

*Interesting...* “What about Bella?”

“Oh, Miss Isabel Chernoff?”

My muscles tensed and my teeth gritted together. I asked, “Is she his wife?”

The maid almost laughed, shyly covering her mouth. “No, no. His sister-in-law. She used to live here but she moved out with her son a few years ago.”

I smiled slightly. So, not only had she shaken her fake name after Stepan died, but she'd taken on my name. It gave me hope. “Do you have an address for me?”

I APPROACHED HER HOUSE, A BEAUTIFUL, THOUGH MODEST TOWNHOUSE. IT was just like her, to use her money to keep herself comfortable and happy, but not excessively so. Clenching my teeth, I rang the doorbell. I heard heavy footsteps, and stepped back with a deep breath. When the door opened, it was a man. But not just any man. It was Lev.

His face changed from shock, to confusion, to complete, utter happiness. “Aleksei?”

He stepped out and grabbed me in a strong hug, he wasn't a young man anymore either. I chuckled, holding him with a tight squeeze. "You've been working for Isabel?" I asked.

"For many years now," he said, smiling as he held my shoulders. "How are you here? Where have you been? You look a little rough my friend." He grinned, and I patted his shoulder.

"We'll get to that." Before I could ask, I heard her voice.

"Lev? Who is it?"

He stepped back inside with a smile and backed away, giving us space. Isabel appeared in the doorway and slowly, her mouth dropped open.

"Alek... Aleksei? Is it really you?" She asked.

"It's me," I said gently as I looked at her, my whole face and body softening from relief. Finally, after so many years of trying and failing, I'd made my way back to her.

"*O bozhe moy!*" She cried out and threw herself at me. I wrapped my arms around her body and pushed my face into her neck, breathing in her scent; I felt her soft skin against my nose, and sighed with absolute contentment. I held her tightly for what felt like an eternity, and I never wanted to let go. I was overwhelmed with joy, and for a moment, all my worries and fears melted away. I knew in that moment that I was finally home.

She lifted her face to mine and kissed me, holding my cheeks tightly. I couldn't believe how happy I felt at that moment. Her lips were soft as ever, and her eagerness toward me hadn't dwindled. I kissed her back, squeezing her body against mine, perhaps a little too tightly.

I felt my heart skip a beat as I felt her warmth against me, and that same electricity from years ago, surged through my body. I could feel the love radiating from her as our lips softly parted, and she looked into my eyes, her gaze filled with an emotion that was so powerful and beautiful. I felt my soul reconnect with hers in that moment.

She pulled back and looked between my eyes, studying my face and the changes it had gone through over the years. I studied her too, appreciating the way her eyes and mouth hadn't changed a bit, even though she, too, had a few extra lines. I felt a mixture of emotions as I gazed at her, nostalgia for the past, admiration for her timeless beauty, and a deep appreciation for the memories we shared. I smiled at her fondly, and she smiled back, a smile that said more than words ever could.

Suddenly, she looked at my cheek and said, “Oh, *blyad’!*” She pulled a cloth from her pocket and swiped my cheek. I quickly realized what was wrong: there was blood on her hands.

“What?” I said as I took her hands and quickly noticed her shirt and tight jeans were smeared with blood too. “What the hell is going on? Are you hurt?”

“No!” She laughed, her eyes seeming a little unsure as she shook her head. “I’ve been trying to find you.”

I cocked my head to the side in confusion. “I don’t understand?”

“Come.”

She grabbed my hand and pulled me inside. We turned a corner to a hidden door. It opened to a staircase, leading down to the basement. When we arrived at the bottom, Isabel guided me ahead and soon... I saw Gregori.

He was strapped to a chair, bloodied and bruised. He was slightly conscious, but with a gag tied tightly between his lips. His eyes widened when he saw me, and his panicked breath bubbled out through his nose. His fingers on one hand were visibly broken, and he had a knife stuck in his thigh.

I took it all in silently. Isabel moved around me, watching my face. “I know this looks bad... I just, I had to find you. He only told me a few weeks ago that you were even alive and I—”

I stopped her by turning to her and placing my finger over her lips. Her eyes darted between mine as I pulled her body closer with one hand and held her against me. It felt good to have access to her body like this again. To just touch her and have her come to me so willingly.

“Gun?” I asked. Her worry dissipated and she looked to the side, toward a wall of metal cabinet doors. I walked over and opened them to find an assortment of guns, knives, ammo, everything. I turned to her with a smile. “Lev help you with this?”

“Oh, no,” she said, grinning with her hands behind her back innocently. “These are mine.”

I chuckled, chose myself a custom-looking all-black Glock, and loaded it. Then I turned to Gregori and just as he began to cry, making begging noises through his gag, I shot him right between the eyes. The room went silent.

I looked down at the gun and nodded. “Nice Glock, baby. I’m glad to see my aim’s still good after all these years.”

When I looked at her, her eyebrows were high in surprise. “You, ah,



didn't want to talk to him first?"

I chuckled and put the gun down before approaching her and touching her cheek. "He's wasted enough of our time already." I dropped my lips to hers and kissed her slowly and softly, reveling in the taste and the sensations I'd only been able to imagine for the past 15 years.

When she pulled away her smile was wide. "I completely agree... Lev!" She shouted, and I heard footsteps jog down the stairs. She turned to him, sliding her hand down into mine.

"Would you mind—"

"Of course, Isabel." He quickly answered, smiling with pride as he looked from me to Gregori's dead body. "You two catch up. I'll take the trash out."

## CHAPTER 32

# ISABEL



“I’ve been in a maximum-security prison in the north,” Aleksei told Lev and me over dinner. “Gregori took me there after I found out that it was him supplying Stepan with drugs and trying to infiltrate the Koslov bratva. He was paying the prison ward and the guards to hold me, beat me, and torture me.”

I trembled with anger and pain at just the thought of him going through that. It was no wonder he’d hardened the way he did. He looked stronger, though not in a healthy way but rather a way that showed he’d been fighting for his life for years. He wore scars like they were tattoos, and I hadn’t yet seen the rest of his body.

“I tried to escape many times but... it took failed attempts and tons of planning and deal-making to figure out the right way to do it. Each failed attempt earned me six months in solitary, so it took a while. I finally found a guard willing to help me—to help us—my cellmate and I. Over time he set it up and when the time came, drove us right out the gates. Of course, he wasn’t going back either.”

“So, what do you owe him?” I asked, knowing it must have been one hell of a deal.

He looked at me carefully before answering, “A new life, far away. Basically, a portion of Gregori’s wealth.”

He seemed so apprehensive and worried that I quickly started laughing, and Lev himself chuckled too while he ate his food. Aleksei dipped his eyebrow in question and I told him with a shrug, “Greg has a whole safe filled with cash. It was something we got out of him during the... *third* broken finger, I think?” I asked Lev, and he nodded. “He didn’t want me

seeing the money he was making through his drug supply business, afraid I would do the math and figure his secret out, so he hid it instead. During the torture he tried to bargain his freedom with it, so we have the combination.”

Alek shook his head. “The *durak*... Well, the more the better. I made promises to my cellmate too, since he’s going to be on the run for a long time.”

“There’s more than enough,” I said.

“What about Maxim? Wouldn’t it technically be his inheritance?”

I shook my head. “On one hand, Maxim has already made a fortune of his own. And the other, he’s refusing to touch anything of Gregori’s. He feels very betrayed.”

“Greg was like a father to him,” Aleksei said frankly. He didn’t show much anger, but I guessed it was due to the years of training himself to not show any emotion at all. That shot to the head told me everything I needed to know about how he felt toward his brother.

“Yes,” I agreed. “But I taught Maxim to be like you, my love. He’s nothing like Gregori, and that’s why he hates him so much.”

His eyes lifted to mine and I realized I was wrong. He was able to show emotion, hearing about his son seemed to bring up worry and possibly guilt.

“You think he’ll want to know me?” He asked.

I shrugged. “He’s full of confusion about his childhood and how you stayed away, but I think he understands why. He’s also grown into a man. He’s married, with a baby on the way.”

“Really?” Alek asked, sitting back with a smile.

“Yeah. You’re finally going to be a true papa, and a grandpa all at once!” I laughed.

Lev stood up and collected our plates, explaining, “Look, I’m going to get out of the house for the night.” My and Alek’s eyes quickly met, realizing his implication. “Tomorrow, I’ll come back and we can spend some more time together, yes?” He nudged Alek who gave him a grateful smile.

When he walked out the room I leaned in and whispered, “He’s finally got himself a girlfriend.”

“Oh,” Aleksei said, nodding as he turned his body to face me. “And me?” He touched my cheek and tilted his head to the side. “Do I have you?”

I sighed, reaching out to drag my thumb across his bottom lip. “Forever, baby.”

Once I’d walked him upstairs and into the bedroom, his eyes didn’t leave

me. With the lights dimmed, I kicked off my shoes and for the first time in ages, felt self-conscious.

“Alek... it’s been a long time.”

He chuckled in a sarcastic way. “Isa... I felt every minute go by. I know that.”

I shrugged. “What I mean is... My body isn’t what it used to be. I’m in my fifties.”

He nodded with understanding. “Firstly, I didn’t expect to come home to a perfectly firm and rounded dancer,” he joked and I laughed, covering my eyes momentarily. “I expected to come home to my love. And she’s right here, looking sexier than I can even explain.”

I looked down at my jeans and loose shirt, stained with smears of blood and continued laughing.

“See? Look at that smile...” he said as though mesmerized. “Now me, on the other hand.” He walked closer and began to unbutton my shirt. “I might have firm muscles, yes... but I have a few more scars than before.” His finger dragged lightly across the scar on my neck. “And none of them are as pretty as this necklace of yours.”

“I want to see,” I said. “Everything.”

“If you insist...” he said with a naughty smile and a bite of his lip, then lifted me onto the bed.

He pulled his shirt over his head and I was met with his defined, hard torso. Love handles, a six pack, and bulging, sexy pecs below his wide shoulders. His biceps were balls of muscle and his forearms thick and veined with strength. My eyes took in every inch and at the same time, discovered his new markings. I could only guess what left them there: stab wounds to his abdomen, deep cuts sliced across his ribs, a gunshot wound on his shoulder. Could it be cigar burns across his chest? They were too big to be cigarettes. Still standing at the foot of the bed he turned around and showed me his back—it was filled with long scars from whippings. I sat forward and ran my fingers down the rippled skin.

Alek turned around and smiled softly. “One of Greg’s buddies at the prison liked to get a little medieval sometimes.” I closed my eyes and sighed. But, before I could even let that pain and guilt seep in, Alek pushed me back and kissed my neck. “Now it’s my turn.”

He unbuttoned my shirt all the way and let it fall open to reveal my black lace bra. Of course, I still liked to wear sexy lingerie even if I didn’t know he

would see it tonight. It was a luxury I gave myself. He kissed the swells of my breasts and moved down, kissing my soft stomach as he unbuttoned my jeans. When he shimmied them over my hips and down my thighs, he found the matching panties.

“Hmmm...” his voice grumbled and while shaking his head, he grinned devilishly. “I saw this body in my dreams every night, and baby... it never looked as good as it does right now.”

“Yeah, sure,” I joked and tried to wiggle free of my jeans. Aleksei leaned over me and locked eyes.

“I know it’s not the same as it was back then, baby, but I love it just the same. You know what? I love it even more now because it’s finally entirely, undeniably, *non-secretively* mine. Correct?”

I grinned, feeling myself blush. “All yours, Aleksei. And no one can say otherwise.”

“Finally,” he said with a roll of his eyes, breaking into deep chuckles because of the years we’d spent fighting our attraction, then having an affair because I was married, and then being together in secret because I was supposedly dead. This time, there was nothing between us, whatsoever.

To get my jeans over my ankles he struggled and tugged hard—reminding me of the very first time he undressed me—although modern “skinny” jeans were tighter than ever. We laughed together and I sat up to throw my shirt across the room before undoing his pants and tugging at them too.

When I pulled his cock out, it was already hard as steel. With my fingers sliding over the silky veined skin, I grinned up at him and he shrugged. “I’ve been in prison for fifteen years, baby. I want to take my time but...fuck, I missed you.”

My gaze became salacious as the urgency he spoke of took over my body. “We have the rest of our lives to take our time. I might not have been in prison, but, God, Aleksei, I lay in this bed every night imagining you here with me. I missed you more than words can say.”

With that, he growled as he leaned in to kiss me deeply. I clawed at his body, pulling him onto the bed and over me. Desperately, I unhooked my bra while he tugged my panties down my legs. It was an awkward shuffle but we laughed, neither losing any sense of our raw need. As soon as I was fully naked, he looked me over and groaned.

“Oh, baby...” He pushed my legs open and moved between them, leaning

over me with his mouth almost against mine. "I'm going to taste every inch of you soon, but right now," he kissed me hard, "right now I really need to be inside you. I need to be one with you again baby."

In that moment of intimacy, I guided his hand downward, a silent invitation for him to explore the depths of my desire. His fingers brushed against the softness between my thighs, and a wave of pleasure washed over me. The intensity of the moment was palpable as he slipped his fingers between my eager folds.

A deep groan escaped his lips, a testament to his longing for this intimate connection. His voice filled with a mix of desire and nostalgia, he confessed to the sleepless nights he had spent yearning for the touch of my intimate core. A playful chuckle escaped his lips, intertwining with the raw passion that enveloped us.

"You never stopped owning me, Aleksei," I whispered, "I've always been yours. But tonight, I need you to claim me again."

His eyes grew dark and his breathing heavy. "Whatever my queen needs, I will happily do."

In the heat of the moment, he gently removed his fingers from me, allowing me to feel the rush of cool air against my warm, sensitive skin. As he held me open, I reached between us, my fingers trembling with anticipation. I could feel his thick, pulsating dick pressed against my entrance, the head poised to enter.

Desire and need consumed me, and I couldn't help but beg for him. "Please, baby," I pleaded, my voice filled with a mixture of desperation and longing. "Don't hold back."

With those words, the tension between us reached its peak. Our bodies moved in perfect synchronization, as he slowly pushed himself inside, inch by agonizing inch. The sensation was overwhelming, a symphony of pleasure and intensity. I gasped, a mix of pleasure and slight discomfort combining as he filled me completely.

We both understood the depth of our connection, the longing and desire that fueled our intimate moments. In that moment, nothing else mattered but the raw, primal connection we shared. Every moment, every touch, was an affirmation of our passion.

As we moved together, our bodies molded into one, the rhythm building and intensifying. Our breaths mingled, hot and heavy, as we lost ourselves in the depths of pleasure. The world around us faded away, leaving only the

sensations that consumed us.

Time seemed to stand still as we surrendered ourselves to the overwhelming ecstasy. Every thrust, every moan, brought us closer to the edge of release. And when that moment finally came, it was like an explosion of pure bliss.

In the aftermath, we lay intertwined, our bodies still humming with the echoes of pleasure. The intensity of our connection lingered, a reminder of the passionate encounter we had shared. In that moment, we knew that our hopes and desires had been fulfilled, and our bond had grown even stronger.

After a few minutes of me lightly brushing my fingers over his hair, he moved slowly and carefully until I was in his arms and we were under the covers, still naked. I snuggled into him and we both fell asleep quickly.

When I awoke, it was morning and I was still in his arms. I'd turned around, but he held me tightly against him, spooning me. I smiled to myself. I had everything I'd ever wanted.

Having my sons back in my life was a blessing beyond measure. After years of separation, we were finally reunited, and it filled my heart with joy. The bond we shared was unbreakable, and I cherished every moment we will spend together. Seeing them grow from afar into fine young men and witnessing the love and support they gave to one another warmed my soul.

But it wasn't just my sons who filled my life with happiness. With them came extended family and grandchildren, creating a vibrant and loving atmosphere in our home. The joy and laughter that echoed through the halls were a testament to the strong connections we had finally built.

And then there was Aleksei. My man. The one who had captured my heart completely. From the moment we met, there was an undeniable chemistry between us. He was not just a partner to me, but my one and only love.

In the depths of our hearts, we forged a love story that transcended boundaries and defied expectations. It was a tale that brimmed with intense passion, lurking danger, and profound sorrow. Yet, amidst the tumultuous journey, our unwavering commitment to one another kept us anchored, creating a bond that was unbreakable.

I stretched my legs out, turned around in his arms, and kissed his mouth. His responding smile told me he was already awake. "Good morning, *krasavitsa*." Gorgeous. I hadn't heard that in so long.

"You say that with your eyes still closed," I teased, knowing that first



thing in the morning, “gorgeous” was not how I would describe my state.

He sighed, pulling me tighter against him. “I don’t want to open them and find out it was all a dream.”

I kissed his lips again, then his neck and his hulking shoulder. “No dreams here, baby... Just me and my morning breath.”

He laughed and easily pulled my body onto his as he turned onto his back. Finally, his eyes opened and he looked at me, brushing my hair behind my ear. “My perfect, beautiful Isabel. By the end of the day, I will have inhaled every scent your body has to offer.” I started to giggle with embarrassment, pushing away, but he held me. “Starting with your morning breath.”

He pressed his mouth to mine and quickly deepened the kiss by sliding his tongue into my mouth, tasting me and apparently loving it by the sound of his grumbling moan.

I let it happen and gave myself to him, allowing him to twist and turn my body, lick and kiss my skin, and as he disappeared under the sheets I said with a happy sigh, “I love you, Aleksei Chernoff.”

I gasped and felt a rush of pleasure course through my body as his tongue explored my most intimate areas. With his voice a little muffled from between my thighs, he replied, “I love you too, Isabel Chernoff.”

WHEN WE FINALLY PULLED OURSELVES VERY RELUCTANTLY OUT OF BED, WE began the arrangements around Gregori’s death. In order to legally obtain his house and the wealth within it, we needed a death certificate. Lev dumped his body in an alleyway and made a call to police we had in our pocket. His death was ruled as one of the many victims of bratva activity in the area. The cops didn’t spend much time on those cases.

Aleksei took over ownership of everything and after sending off courier boxes full of cash to his two friends, he took only a few mementos from the house, and decided to sell it.

I offered for us to move to a new home together but he claimed he liked this one.

“It’s modest, it’s intimate,” he told me as we sat in the living room together. “And it represents your freedom, baby,” he said with a tender look.

I quickly teared up when he said that. He was right. It was the first house I'd ever earned on my own.

"I guess it represents your freedom now too, huh?" I said emotionally, wiping my cheek.

"I'd like to be a part of it," he admitted, nodding his head. "But we'll need to make this fake marriage a real thing first, before we can put my name on that deed."

I felt loving warmth fill my entire body and narrowed my eyes at him. "Aleksei Chernoff, are you asking me to marry you?"

He smiled that special smile, wide and happy. "Isa, baby, would you make me the luckiest *svoloch*' alive, and just marry me already?"

I laughed, wrapping my arms around his neck. "Yes, baby. From the first moment I saw you, it's always been yes."

# ISABEL



When Maxim made it to Saint Petersburg with Crissy, he and Aleksei spent a long time in the office together. All I could hear was the tone of their voices—Maxim’s angry, because his father had chosen to not be a part of his life—and Alek’s patient, because he had a lot to explain. But they shared an enemy now, and Maxim was in complete agreement with the way his uncle had met his end, since he’d had the same plan for him at Sorokin’s house anyway. Gregori didn’t deserve to make excuses, hear a last goodbye, or even beg for mercy. He deserved no more time at all.

Soon, I had a house full of family. My Koslov sons and their new families found other accommodations since our house didn’t have enough rooms, but we gathered in the dining room which was luckily quite large. I had caterers working on a feast for us in the kitchen.

Misha, Dmitry, and Ivan reunited with Aleksei emotionally. He was there for them during some of the hardest years of their lives, and when Alek held Dmitry’s head and touched his forehead to his, I’d never seen either man as emotional as in that moment. Both were hardened, tortured men. But both turned out to have the softest hearts and it showed as they merely looked into each other’s eyes and nodded with understanding.

“Okay, everyone, listen up!” I called out, wearing a long sleeved red dress that hugged my curves and fell to mid-calf; with red-bottom thin-heel black stilettos. My dark hair hung over my shoulders in delicate curls. Aleksei stood next to me in his charcoal gray suit with a black shirt open at the neck while Maxim, the Koslov boys, as well as Sophia, Gemma, Willow

and Crissy all quieted down to hear me out.

“We’ve decided to combine this reunion with something else we’ve been meaning to do for basically a lifetime.” I looked at Alek and he smiled at me, sliding his hand onto my lower back. “We want you all to be witnesses to our official marriage.”

It seemed not many of them were surprised, and my announcement was met with happy cheers, wide smiles and even tearfulness from my pregnant daughters-in-law.

Not long after, we stood before them with a priest looking between us in our living room, my new daughters were seated on the couches and my sons standing behind them. I didn’t need to be in a church or spend unimaginable amounts of money on a two-day long wedding. I just needed him, Aleksei, as my official husband.

With locked gazes and my hands clasping his, I vowed: “I promise to be irrevocably yours, to sleep by your side and hold you safe in my arms, until death and beyond.” Anyone who knew our history would understand how difficult it had been for us to achieve that, just to sleep next to each other and feel safe.

Aleksei vowed: “I promise to never leave you. To hold you safe, support you and encourage you to reach your dreams, until death and beyond.”

I smiled with tears in my eyes as he pushed the wedding band onto my finger, alongside my blood-red ruby engagement ring—a favorite of mine from my own store—and quickly pulled him down to kiss me. Everyone cheered and whistled loudly.

After the kiss I held him and in reaction to his vows, I whispered into his ear, “I’ve already reached my dreams, baby. It’s always been to have you at my side.”

And that was no lie. While as a young woman I did want to get out of Belarus and make something of myself, most of everything I did over the past 25 years was for Aleksei, to clear our path of the obstacles that prevented us from doing just this, marrying, sharing a bed, and spending quality time with our family.

Together, we embark on a new chapter, filled with endless possibilities and the promise of a brighter future. We may stumble along the way, but we will never lose sight of the freedom we have fought so hard to attain. After a lifetime of obstacles, we have finally found our moment to be free, and we will cherish it for the rest of our lives.

# TRANSLATION GLOSSARY

*Blyad'* — Damn  
*Chto za huy* — What the fuck  
*Durak* — Fool  
*D'yavol* — Devil  
*Debil yobani* — Fucking idiot  
*Kukla* — Doll  
*Krasavitsa* — Gorgeous  
*Malyshka* — Baby  
*Meelaya* — Dear  
*O Bozhe moi* — Oh my God  
*Podonok* — Scumbag  
*Priyatel'/priyateli* — Pal/pals  
*Prostitutka* — Prostitute  
*Shlyukha* — Whore  
*Suchka* — Bitch  
*Svoloch'* — Bastard  
*Ublyudki* — Bastards  
*Uyti s dorogi!* — Get out of the way!  
*Varenye* — Russian jam  
*Yebat'* — Fuck  
*Yebena met* — Holy shit

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



I'm Misty Winters, the "Mother of Chihuahuas"... also of three human children, and I'm the debut author of some new steamy contemporary romance novels.

I've always been an avid reader, devouring whole books in one sitting, and with my vivid imagination, writing was a natural next step. I love creating plots and characters that can provide my readers with an escape from the everyday. My ability to concoct stories has always been my inspiration, and besides, who doesn't want to spend the day dreaming up romantic bad boy leads?

I'm an animal fanatic, and my little fur babies, Lulu, Oliver, and Winston, are my cheerleaders while I write. I firmly believe a good laugh can heal the soul, and for those it doesn't, red wine will do the trick.

I love to camp, hike, travel and explore, but also to hunker down in my garden and, of course, read! Mexican food is my go-to because I like my food the same way I like my romantic leads, spicy! I was born and raised in Arizona, but my family and I now live in Iowa.

I hope you'll follow me to stay up to date with all that is Misty Winters.

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