

Cruel
PROMISE

ORYOLOV BRATVA BOOK TWO

NICOLE FOX

CRUEL PROMISE

ORYOLOV BRATVA
BOOK 2

NICOLE FOX

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CONTENTS

Mailing List

Also by Nicole Fox

Cruel Promise

1. Emma
2. Ruslan
3. Emma
4. Emma
5. Emma
6. Ruslan
7. Ruslan
8. Emma
9. Emma
10. Emma
11. Emma
12. Ruslan
13. Emma
14. Emma
15. Ruslan
16. Ruslan
17. Emma
18. Ruslan
19. Emma
20. Ruslan
21. Emma
22. Emma
23. Ruslan
24. Emma
25. Emma
26. Ruslan
27. Ruslan
28. Emma
29. Ruslan
30. Ruslan
31. Ruslan
32. Emma
33. Emma
34. Ruslan
35. Emma
36. Emma

37. [Ruslan](#)
38. [Emma](#)
39. [Emma](#)
40. [Ruslan](#)
41. [Ruslan](#)
42. [Emma](#)
43. [Emma](#)
44. [Ruslan](#)
45. [Ruslan](#)
46. [Ruslan](#)
47. [Ruslan](#)
48. [Emma](#)
49. [Ruslan](#)
50. [Emma](#)
51. [Emma](#)
52. [Ruslan](#)
53. [Emma](#)
54. [Emma](#)
55. [Ruslan](#)
56. [Emma](#)
57. [Ruslan](#)
58. [Ruslan](#)

[Epilogue: Emma](#)

[Extended Epilogue: Ruslan](#)

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Sinner's Lullaby (Book 2)

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CRUEL PROMISE

BOOK TWO OF THE ORYOLOV BRATVA DUET

It started with an accidental dirty voicemail.

It ended with my boss's baby in my belly.

One butt dial changed my life forever.

Ruslan Oryolov went from boss to baby daddy in the blink of an eye.

But other stuff changed along the way, too.

I learned who Ruslan is—who he REALLY is.

I learned that the children I've come to love as my own can't stay in this city anymore.

I've learned that *none* of us can.

So we're running.

But of course, Ruslan won't let us go that easily.

And when he learns about what I'm taking from him—the baby in my belly—he makes me a promise.

A very, very cruel promise.

No matter where you go... No matter how far or how fast you flee...

I will always find you.

CRUEL PROMISE is Book Two of the Oryolov Bratva duet. Ruslan and Emma's story begins in Book One, CRUEL PARADISE.

EMMA

I'm compiling a comprehensive mental list of all the things you shouldn't do when you're on the run from a violent mob boss. Note that these rules are especially important when you have three kids in tow, including an impatient six-year-old and her *very* loud five-year-old sister, all while looking like an Egyptian mummy because you're wrapped from head to toe in gauze to cover up the thousand and one bleeding cuts you got when your deadbeat brother-in-law pushed you through a glass coffee table.

Rule number one: don't tell the five-year-old you're leaving town on an adventure. Because she *will* tell every single person she makes eye contact with.

Rule number two: don't call your best friend and admit to all the secrets you've been keeping from her for the last six months. Because she *will* freak the hell out and threaten to call the cops.

Rule number three: don't bring all three kids to Walmart to buy the emergency supplies you need to tide you over on this great escape. Kids have no sense of what constitutes an emergency and they *will* try to buy unicorn Snuggies, light-up Slinkies, and their bodyweight's worth of Pop-Tarts.

So far, I've broken all three rules. This little "adventure" is off to a great start.

"Caro, Rae, for the last time, you can't buy—"

"Excuse me, hon?" someone says. I jerk around, totally rattled by the unfamiliar hand on my shoulder. He flinches off me. "Whoa there. Just sayin'

hello, darling. No need to fret.”

I squint at the man standing next to my loaded cart. I may have gone a little overboard with the supplies. It’s stuffed to the brim with toiletries, sleeping bags, canned foods, extra clothes for each of the kids, a flashlight and a backup flashlight...

I just wanted to be prepared. Then again, can you ever be prepared to uproot your entire life? Your kids’ lives?

“Uh, yeah, hi, hello,” I say distractedly. I scan the surrounding area. I’m currently standing in the dried foods aisle, but two of my three wards are nowhere to be found. “Josh! Where are your sisters?”

My eight-year-old points towards the next aisle. “Over there. I’ll get them.”

Before I can tell him to stay put, he’s gone, too.

Great.

Now, I’ve lost all three.

And apparently, I have an audience. The man who startled me is still there, standing by my cart, looking shamelessly at its contents. “Looks like you’ve got half the store in there,” he chuckles, scratching at his thin brown beard.

I force a smile. “If you’ll excuse me.”

He puts his hand on the handle of my cart. “Miss, do you need some help?”

My heartbeat kicks up a notch. What if this guy works for Ruslan? Does he look like mafia or Bratva or whatever the hell Ruslan calls himself? Is he dangerous?

He’s certainly large enough to do some damage. And he’s got those sharp eyes. *Dangerous* eyes. Although, come to think of it, I didn’t exactly listen to my better instincts last time I came into contact with a certain pair of dangerous amber eyes.

It’s kinda how I got in this whole mess to begin with.

“I don’t need any help. But thank you for asking.” I try to push my cart down the aisle but he doesn’t remove his hand and the wheels squeal in protest.

I turn to him warily but he gives me only a sympathetic smile. “It’s just that I would never forgive myself if I didn’t help someone in your position.”

“Oh, that’s kind of you. But it’s really not necessary.”

He leans in a little closer and the scent of tuna hits me like a truck in the night. *Oh, yuck.* My eyes start watering.

“You really shouldn’t be out in your condition. With three kids, no less.” *Speaking of—where the hell are they?* “You should be at home with your feet up while someone else does all the heavy lifting.”

“Trust me: if I had someone else, I would absolutely be home with my feet up.”

Or if I had a home to do that at.

The man’s eyebrows rise. He’s got bushy ones to match his mustache. “So no husband? A boyfriend, maybe? A gal-friend?”

Alrighty. I wasn’t a fan of this conversation even before he asked about my relationship status. I’m certainly not up for it now.

“I really should be going.”

I rip the cart out from underneath his hand and pray that he doesn’t follow me. I hustle into the next aisle and spot Josh at the end of it with the girls holding each of his hands. Gritting my teeth, I beeline straight for them.

“*Guys.* We had a deal. I agreed to bring you because you all promised me you would listen and never leave my side, remember?”

Reagan and Caroline exchange a glance. “Actually,” Caroline says, tossing her hair over her shoulder, “you only brought us because Aunt Phoebe couldn’t get off work and that motel is scary.”

“Super-duper scary!” Reagan chirps.

I can’t exactly blame them. That godawful motel scares the shit out of me, too, and I’m almost twenty-seven years old. But it was the cheapest and most remote hideout that Phoebe could find for us on short notice.

“Yes, yes, I know. But please, can we listen to Auntie Em anyway?” I beg.

“Can we stay by my side? Pretty please?”

Reagan and Caroline giggle. “Okaaaay.”

I give their heads a nervous tousle and then gesture for them to follow me towards the checkout counters. I scan the crowds as I step up to the cashier.

I can't see Mr. Tuna Breath anymore. *Thank God for that.* But every time I glance at the kids, I also catch Josh staring at me. I give him what I hope is a reassuring wink but he doesn't so much as crack a smile.

“Hey,” I whisper while the girls bicker about something or the other. “Don't look so worried, J. This is gonna be an adventure.”

He frowns. “I'm not *five*, Aunt Em. That's not gonna work on me.”

I sigh. “Kid, I know this isn't ideal—” I give the cashier a tight smile and start loading the conveyor belt with our stuff. “—but it's necessary. You know that, right?”

He nods stiffly. “Yeah, but I don't get why we can't just call Ruslan and ask him for help. He would help us.”

Every time one of them mentions his name, it feels like a knife to my heart. Or a glass shard in my thigh. Turns out, the two feelings are extremely similar. I would know.

“We're gonna have to do this without Ruslan, buddy.”

“But *why*?”

Because he hates my fucking guts now and he didn't care about me enough to want to hear my side of the story.

“It's complicated.”

“I hate when grown-ups say that.”

I run a frustrated hand down the side of my face. “Yeah. I felt the same way once.”

We manage to get through the checkout and then I herd the kids up and order them to form a straight line beside me. “Like ducklings. We're gonna walk

fast, okay?”

“Do we have to go back to that place?” Reagan whines. She’s using those big blue eyes of hers to maximum effect.

“Fraid so, Rae-Rae. But we won’t be there for long. Now, come on.”

As we leave the store, I have this weird sense that we’re being watched. Mr. Tuna Breath again, maybe? But when I glance back over my shoulder, I don’t see him or anyone else that seems remotely interested in us.

It’s just the paranoia talking, Emma. Be cool. We’re almost outta here.

Once we’ve got all our goodies stuffed in the trunk of the car, I have to strap the girls into their car seats. “Josh, stay close, okay?”

I hate that I have to turn my back on him to help the girls with their seatbelts. “I’m almost done, Josh. Then you can get—”

The screech of tires sends my panic meter blasting off the charts. No one should be driving that fast in a Walmart parking lot. I back out of the car, ass first. “Josh!”

My feet hit the concrete and I whirl around to grab him, except—

He’s not there.

He’s standing a few feet away from me, transfixed by the black sedan with dirty windows screeching down the lot towards us.

The sedan screams to a halt right in front of him. Josh’s face is on the cusp of a smile. A smile? Why on Earth would he be smil—

Oh, God—he thinks it’s Ruslan.

He’s not stupid or reckless. So there’s no other explanation for why he would move *towards* the reckless vehicle with that distant, hopeful look on his face.

The side door flings open and a man appears. A man with a black mask obscuring his features. I see it all in slow motion as Josh realizes something is wrong. He throws himself backward, but it’s too late.

The man grabs him by the shoulders.

Hauls him into the darkened interior of the car.

And the door slams shut.

I beg my legs to move faster but by the time I reach the vehicle, the locks are thrown and the wheels are beginning to squeal. I pound my fists against the dark glass, even as the wheels spin fast and the machine lurches away.

“No! Josh! JOSH!”

A tiny fishtail of the rear bumper knocks me sideways and sends me tumbling onto my ass. I hit hard, hard enough for the glass cuts to reopen in a hundred little lines of pain, but I don't have time to sit and cower. I'm on my feet again immediately, leaping into the driver's seat of my car and tearing out of the parking spot as fast as I can.

The girls are squealing in terror, but I can't tend to them right now. I have to get Josh back.

I swerve out of the parking lot and the girls scream again in unison. “It's okay, girls. It's okay. It's all gonna be okay.”

The truth is I'm just spitting words at them. But even tried and tested words of comfort don't cut it when you're speeding through the streets, horns blaring, tires smoking, every bump in the road sending us careening left and right and left again.

“Auntie Em! Slow down!” Caroline screams.

“You forgot Josh!” Reagan cries. “You forgot Josh!”

I have eyes on the sedan. Of course it doesn't have a license plate. *Fucking bastards*. This has to be Mr. Tuna Breath's doing. That run-in was too fucking weird to be coincidental.

“Auntie Em! What are you doing?” Caroline screams when I swerve to avoid oncoming traffic.

What *am* I doing? Who the fuck do I think I am—Jason Bourne?

I need help.

I don't have time to let that sink in. The sedan is moving fast and if I blink, I

could lose them. My first instinct is to call 911 but my hand is shaking when I pick up my phone. Another pothole makes my thumb pull up the speed dial menu instead of the keypad.

“Fuck!”

I drop my phone as the car in front of me slows down and I have to wiggle around him fast. Thankfully, it’s ringing and, since my phone is connected to Bluetooth, I’m able to transfer the call to speakerphone from the steering wheel.

The only problem is I didn’t dial 911.

*I accidentally dialed **Ruslan Oryolov**.*

“Emma.”

That deep, confident voice is bringing back all sorts of terrible memories.

Stop—this isn’t about you.

I don’t want him knowing that I’m leaving town.

I don’t want him knowing that I’m pregnant, either.

But I *do* want my nephew back. And if Ruslan can get Josh back safe—then so be it.

“Someone just took Josh!” I gasp. “I’m not sure who it was. He was masked. They’re driving a black sedan with no license plate number. I... I... *oh, God* —” A sob bursts out of my lips at the same time that Reagan and Caroline start crying. “I-I lost them. I lost the car. I don’t know which way they went.”

His voice comes through loud and clear. Chillingly calm and extremely confident. “Send me your location right now.”

I breathe out, more of a sob than an exhale.

“Listen to me, *kiska*: we’re going to get him back.”

RUSLAN

“I want two teams on this!” I roar. “Three, four, ten, I don’t give a fuck what it takes—I want as many fucking teams out there as it takes to get Josh back.”

Kirill’s already on his phone, calling in the cavalry. I’m storming towards the elevator doors, trying to keep my anger from getting the better of me.

Two junior execs approach the elevator just as the doors are about to close. “OUT!” I yell and they spring back. Kirill slips in behind me and we plummet towards the ground floor.

“Well?” I demand when he hangs up.

“I’ve got three teams heading in Emma’s direction now. They’re going in from different routes so they’ll be able to box the kidnapers in. We’ll find him, *sobrat*; I swear it.”

I know he’s being confident for my sake, but this is still New York City. We’re looking for a needle in a haystack.

I’ll take those fucking odds.

“Why?” I growl as we rush to my SUV. “Why the fuck would anyone take the boy?”

Kirill takes the passenger seat as I get behind the wheel. “Well, he *is* the one kid you’ve spent a lot of quality time with lately.”

My second-in-command is right. All those boxing lessons at the gym... I was

a fool to think those moments would go unnoticed. Nothing I did is ever innocent where my enemies are concerned.

“*FUCK!*” I spit, furious with my own short-sightedness. “If anything happens to—”

“Nothing will happen to him,” Kirill insists. “We’re going to get him back long before anything happens.”

“Keep your eye on Emma’s location. The kidnappers can’t be too far from her. And get Emma back on the phone.”

He nods and does as I say. The ringtone grates on my eardrums, but her voice when she answers is like honey. “K-Kirill?”

“Ruslan’s here, too,” my second explains. “You’re on speakerphone. Where are you exactly?”

She names the cross streets in a shaky tremor. “Pretty sure I caught sight of the black car a second ago but I can’t be sure.”

I can hear soft sniffing in the back. *Blyat’*. “Are the girls with you?”

“I couldn’t exactly leave them in the Walmart parking lot.” Before I can rip into her about putting herself in this situation in the first place, Emma gasps. “I see them! The black car with the dirty windows! They just turned down toward the interstate.”

I veer between cars and catch sight of the target. No license plate. *Bingo*. “I see them.”

“Ruslan—get him back,” Emma begs. “I just want him back safe.”

“Kirill,” I growl, hitting the accelerator. “Hang up.”

The line goes dead and the lights turn red. I come up next to the black sedan, staying far enough behind them that the front of my SUV is in line with the back of their car. The kidnappers have no idea that I’m right beside them.

But Josh does.

His eyes go wide when he catches sight of me. I put a finger to my lips and he nods.

Smart kid.

I tap at my own seatbelt, indicating to Josh to put his on. He nods once and, immediately afterward, the light changes and the sedan speeds off.

I pursue. Kirill's eyes veer towards me. "Do you have a plan?"

"I always have a plan. This one just happens to be somewhat unconventional.

"Fuck me." Kirill leans towards the dash. "He just picked up speed. I think they know they're being followed."

Clenching my jaw, I steer into a bylane that I know connects back up with the main road. Kirill grabs the edges of his seat as I commit a dozen different traffic violations to make this little detour.

"Yup," Kirill confirms. "They definitely know we're on their tail."

I swipe the side mirrors as I cram the SUV down a narrow alley that's definitely not meant for cars this big. By my calculation, the black sedan will be coming up soon. Which means I have roughly a two-second window to make my move. The timing has to be perfect. A millisecond too late and I could be crashing into the back of the car where Josh is.

"Are you going to do what I think you're going to do?"

I don't answer; I'm too busy stomping on the gas. Kirill braces himself. The sedan should be whizzing by right about—

"Fucking HELL!" Kirill yells as I explode out of the mouth of the alleyway and right into the sedan.

The driver turns to me a second before the nose of my SUV makes contact with the side of his door. His eyes are wide with terror—and the knowledge that there's not a single fucking thing he can do but get hit.

Glass explodes inward and the shriek of twisting metal tears through the air. The sedan spins out of control until it's stopped by a stubborn fire hydrant that rips off half of the hood, leaving engine parts spilling out like guts and leaking oil like blood.

Smoke billows softly as Kirill and I jump out of the SUV and run to the

sedan. “Secure those fuckers,” I order Kirill. “I’ll get Josh.”

I’m halfway there when I notice someone else running towards the wreck, her long curtain of hair transporting me, for just a split moment, to a time when I was actually happy.

Emma.

“Josh!” she screams in unadulterated panic. “JOSH!” I grab her before she can get to the wreck but she looks right through me. “No! Let me go. You crashed into them!”

I twist her around by her shoulders so that she can’t see the wreck. “I will make sure he’s okay. But right now, it’s not safe for you to leave the girls. Go!”

It’s annoying that, even now, my first instinct is to protect her. *Mine*, the beast inside me roars.

No. Fucking no. She’s not mine anymore.

She never truly was.

I give her a light shove backwards and race to the sedan. When I pull open the back passenger door, Josh has curled himself into an upright ball, the seatbelt strapped over his chest.

Instant relief.

“Ruslan!” he cries.

He thrashes against the destroyed seatbelt. I lean in, unsheathe my pocketknife, and saw at it until it pops free. When I pull him out of the wreckage, he clings to me, shivering uncontrollably.

“I *knew* you would come,” he whispers in my ear. “I knew it. I just knew it.”

I carry him around the car where Kirill is zip-tying the two kidnappers. A swarm of my soldiers surround them so there’s no chance of escape. I don’t recognize either man. But I don’t plan on forgetting them anytime soon. Not until they’ve been punished for what they’ve done.

“Breathe,” I tell the boy, running my hand down Josh’s back as I walk him

towards the beatdown Chevy that Emma is not supposed to be driving.

She's standing by the open door of the back seat, cooing softly in an effort to calm the girls down. She's wearing long pants and a long-sleeved shirt but I can still see the bandages under her cuffs. Not to mention the scrapes and bruises on her face.

My instant reaction is rage.

Someone is gonna fucking die for this.

I try to quell the beast in my chest, but it is not so easily silenced. I set Josh down and he scampers towards Emma, who snatches him up and holds him tight. That right there—the strength in her arms, the relief in her face—is the whole reason I wanted her to be the mother of my children.

Who wouldn't want a mother like that for their kids?

She's got his face cupped between her hands now and she's talking to him in a low voice. Those blue eyes of hers are intense, bright with unshed tears. Then she kisses the top of his head. "Go hug your sisters," she murmurs. "They need to know that you're alright."

He nods and climbs into the back of the Chevy.

Which leaves Emma and me.

She takes a tentative step toward me, dragging her feet forward like she's being forced to the chopping block. "Ruslan..." Her voice is not its usual self. It's reserved. Purposefully distant. "Thank you."

"I'm going to make sure nothing like that ever happens again."

"How can you make that kind of promise?" she scoffs. "You can't predict everyone and everything."

My jaw clenches despite my best efforts. "No, you're right. Even the ones closest to you can surprise you."

The vein in her forehead pops. It's barely visible, though, concealed by her bandage and a bruise. "Or disappoint you."

Her lips are turned down. And even though it pisses me off, even though I

don't deserve it...

Her heartbreak is still a thorn under my skin.

EMMA

“What happened?” Ruslan asks gruffly. His eyes track every bruise on my face, every cut on my skin.

I so want to be aloof and detached. I want to be the grownup here. But my anger gets in the way of my better instincts.

“Do you even care?”

His jaw tightens. “I suppose I shouldn’t.” He glances back over his shoulder, probably just to prove how little he cares.

“Right. Anyway, like I said, thank you for intervening. I swear, this will not be a regular thing. In fact, it won’t be a thing at all.” I back up towards the Chevy. “I’m just gonna take the kids and—”

Those amber eyes flash to mine. “As much as I would like to send you off right now, I need to make sure the situation is contained.”

I frown. “What do you—”

“We don’t know if those two *mudaks* were working in isolation or if there’s another team they’re coordinating with. Letting you drive off right now would be foolish.”

If I didn’t know any better, I’d think he was trying to keep me here. Keep me close.

The problem is, I *do* know better.

I glance back at the Chevy. “Ruslan, the kids are exhausted. Not to mention terrified. I need to get them away from here.”

He looks unsympathetic, but before he can argue with me, the Chevy jiggles from side to side and all three kids emerge from the back seat.

“Guys! Get back in—”

My protests are drowned out in a throng of “Ruslan! Ruslan!”

Caroline and Reagan both tackle him at the waist. *Hope they knee him in the balls while they’re at it*, I think viciously.

“You saved the day!” Caroline cries.

“You’re like the knight in shining silver.”

“*Armor*, Rae!”

“I can’t say that word.” Reagan scowls, jutting her tongue out at Caroline.

Ruslan chuckles and something jolts through me when I hear that sound. A part of me genuinely believed I’d never hear it again. It’s nice to know that it still exists at all. I wondered if perhaps I’d stolen it from him for good.

It strikes me that that’s a pretty egotistical thought. Someone, someday, is gonna make him chuckle the way I used to, the way the kids are making him chuckle right now.

Whoever she is, I already hate her.

“Girls, come on. Give Ruslan some space.”

I’m struck by this overwhelming sense of *déjà vu*. I feel like I’ve said something similar to the girls before. I *have*; I definitely have. Except that was during one of his first visits to the apartment. We were right on the cusp of a glorious few months.

That was the beginning.

This is the end.

None of the children are even looking at me. All three are focused on Ruslan.

All three are looking at him as though he's some kind of sainted savior. And it makes the pain in my chest all the more piercing.

What have I done? Unintentionally or not, I gave them a father figure, another male role model who ended up disappearing from their lives without so much as an explanation or a goodbye. I exposed them to a world that was too dangerous for any of them. I made the mistake of believing that Ruslan would protect us, that he would *always* be around to protect us.

He was so larger than life in my eyes that I forgot the crucial lesson I learned when Sienna died: it doesn't matter how bright a person shines; it doesn't matter how invincible they seem or how perennial they may appear...

Everyone is human.

Everyone can leave.

Even heroes can die.

I'm distracted by Kirill who walks over with his eyes fixed on me. I'm not sure what that expression on his face is—discomfort? Worry? Nerves? Whatever it is, I have no idea why it would be aimed at me in the first place. Not when Josh was the one who was almost snatched away from us.

"You okay?" he mumbles.

Ruslan's head jerks in our direction. Listening. Always listening.

"I'm shook up, but otherwise fine."

He nods before turning to Ruslan. "We've got the situation contained, *pakhan*. I'll transfer the men back to base for questioning. They appear to be working alone."

"But why... why take Josh?" I interrupt. Kirill and Ruslan exchange a glance and I connect the dots. I force myself to make eye contact with Ruslan. "This is about you, isn't it?"

Ruslan nods grimly. "Like I said, I won't let this happen again."

I grit my teeth. "We should get going, kids."

"Nooo, Auntie Em!" Reagan complains. She's clinging onto Ruslan's arm.

“Can we stay with Ruslan?”

“Yeah!” Caroline agrees. “No one will mess with us then.”

“Ruslan’s busy.” *We’re also not his problem anymore.* “And we need to get home.”

“Home?” Reagan asks enthusiastically, bouncing on the balls of her feet. “You mean *home-home* and not—”

No, no, no—

“Oh my goodness!” I gasp, making all the kids jump. “I, um, forgot to call Aunt Phoebe. She was expecting us ages ago.” The girls look confused. Josh is the only one whose expression has turned wary. “If everything’s settled here, we should be going.”

Ruslan’s gaze is trained on me. Lord, that stare—it draws things out of me without him even having to lift a finger. “I’ll escort you home. Or to Phoebe’s, if that’s where you’re going.”

Is he calling me out? Or is he just being protective?

“There’s really no need.”

He’s got that pinched look on his face. Lips pursed, eyebrows joined in one skeptical slash. That stubborn *God-himself-can’t-change-my-mind* kind of look.

“I insist.” His tone is biting. “Kirill and I will follow you. Your place or Phoebe’s?”

Shit. “My place. I’ll, uh... I’ll just have her meet us at home.”

“Can we go in Ruslan’s car?” Caroline pleads, putting her hands together.

“Yeah, yeah! Please? Pretty please, Aunt Emma!” Reagan joins in.

“Girls—”

“It’s okay with me,” Ruslan agrees.

I know he’s just loving this chance to undermine me in front of them. To tear

down every aspect of my life. But I *do* need to talk to Josh. I can practically see all the questions rolling around in that little head of his.

“Okay, fine,” I relent. “But behave, okay?”

The girls whoop and dart off with Ruslan and Kirill. I gesture for Josh to join me in the Chevy. The moment I’m in the driver’s seat, I grab my phone and text Phoebe.

EMMA: *Pheeb, there’s been a situation. It’s a long story. But I need you to come to Hell’s Kitchen now. FYI, Ruslan will be with us.*

I don’t wait for her to reply before I start driving.

“Aunt Emma...?”

I take a deep breath. “Josh, honey, we can’t tell Ruslan we’re staying in the motel. In fact, we can’t tell him anything at all. Okay?”

I don’t have to look at him to know that he doesn’t like the sound of that. “But *why*?”

“It’s complicated.” He groans. “Okay, okay, I’m sorry. That’s a lame answer. The thing is, no one can know that we’re leaving town, Josh.”

“Even Ruslan? He’s our friend.”

Not anymore.

I feel something in my belly. It’s not nearly dramatic enough to qualify as pain. But it does feel like a reminder.

Ruslan can never know about this baby. If he did, he’d never let me leave. I wouldn’t be his secretary or his lover anymore; I wouldn’t even be his friend. I’d be no more than a womb for hire. And that would make me his prisoner.

I’m not about to subject myself to that kind of torture.

More to the point, I won’t subject this baby to that kind of torture.

“Ruslan has his own life to get on with, Josh. And we have ours. Plus, the fewer people that know about this, the better.”

“Aunt Phoebe knows.”

“Aunt Phoebe is family.”

“So is Ruslan!”

I can feel the tears gathering in my throat. How do I explain to an eight-year-old that the one man he admires more than any other wants nothing to do with us anymore?

I know Ruslan cares about my kids. I know he cares about Josh. But clearly not enough to give me the benefit of the doubt. Certainly not enough to want to keep me in his life.

“Ruslan’s not family, Josh.” It actually hurts me to say that out loud. “We wish him well. But we have to move on. It’s not safe in New York anymore, not with your father here. Not with... everything else here.”

I catch Josh’s frown from my peripheral vision. “Why do you think they took me?” he asks in a small voice.

My breath hitches up. He deserves some honesty. If he’s mature enough to ask certain questions, then he’s entitled to know certain answers.

“I think it may have something to do with... Ruslan.”

Josh’s frown deepens. “Because they saw us together?”

“I think so.”

He keeps picking at his cuticles like he wants to tear off the nails at the root. “Ruslan’s involved with some dangerous people, isn’t he?”

I nod. “I think so.”

None so dangerous as he is himself. I was a fool not to worry about that.

Josh descends into silence and my phone pings. That’ll be Phoebe’s reply. I wait until we get to a red light to check.

PHOEBE: *Don’t worry. I’ll meet you there. I’m actually only two blocks away.*

Bless her.

When we pull up to Hell's Kitchen, Phoebe is standing outside the building, leaning against the wall with her leg kicked up. She rushes over as Josh and I get out of the Chevy.

“You guys okay?” she asks. “What happened? Where are the girls?”

“With Ruslan,” I explain, gesturing over to the SUV parked on the opposite side of the street. “I’ll explain everything later. Just play along.”

She nods as Ruslan and Kirill walk the girls over to us.

“Aunt Pheeb!” Reagan rushes into Phoebe’s arms.

“Can Ruslan and Kirill come in?” Caroline asks.

“I’m sure Ruslan and Kirill are very busy, honey,” I say quickly. “Just say thank you and goodbye now, please.”

Caroline and Reagan pout. “Aww, man!”

Phoebe watches both men with eagle eyes. Then, after the girls say their goodbyes, she gently pulls them in the direction of the building, leaving me to talk to Kirill and Ruslan.

“Thank you both.” I address both men but I only make eye contact with Kirill.

Kirill glances at his boss but, when he doesn’t say anything, Kirill takes the initiative. “If you run into any trouble, don’t hesitate to call, okay?”

“Okay. Thank you.”

I chance a quick glance at Ruslan. His jaw is still set in that stubborn square and my stomach flutters with the secret I’m keeping.

“Goodbye,” I whisper. I’m speaking for myself *and* our unborn child.

Then I turn my back on him and walk away.

He doesn’t bother to say a word.

EMMA

“Are they gone yet?”

The sun is fifteen minutes from setting and Phoebe and I have been watching out of the windows for the past half an hour.

“Still there,” she sighs, letting the curtains fall closed.

“Do you think he knows?”

Phoebe’s eyebrow hitches up. “How can he possibly? Unless he’s been watching you the past few days...?”

Goosebumps prickle my skin. I collapse onto the armchair opposite the couch where the girls are currently sprawled out, tangled against each other and sleeping peacefully. Josh retreated to his room several minutes ago. I don’t want to intrude—until I have to, anyway.

“Ugh,” I complain softly. “We need to be out of here before Ben comes back.”

“There’s a Knicks game tonight. I think we’re good.”

I snort out a depressed laugh. “You never know. My luck hasn’t really been all that great lately.”

“Riiight... luck. That’s the issue at hand.”

I shoot her a look. “You really gonna make me feel bad about this? ‘Cause

trust me: I feel bad enough as it is.”

“I’m not trying to make you feel bad, hon. I’m sorry—that came out wrong.” The thing with Phoebe is, if you stare at her long enough, she’ll crack. Sure enough, her mouth twitches, trembles, and then she blurts out, “It’s just I still can’t *believe* you signed a contract exchanging money for sex!”

“I’m not proud of it!” I hiss back.

“Well, you should be,” she retorts, completely taking me by surprise. “It was ballsy. Hell, it’s the type of thing Sienna would’ve done before she had the kids. The only mistake you made was falling in love with him.”

And there it is—the undeniable fact that, for all his faults, I *am* in love with Ruslan.

I’m also pregnant with his baby.

I’m *also* praying he gets bored and drives off soon or else this whole thing is gonna blow up in my face.

I’ve got a lot going on these days.

Phoebe takes another peek out the window. “Still there, by the way.”

I chew on my bottom lip. “He suspects something. Why else would he *still* be here?”

“Maybe he’s trying to make sure you’re okay.”

“Please. He doesn’t give a shit about me. If anything, he’s here for the kids. Which is nice but extremely inconvenient. We need to get back to the motel and finish planning our escape out of this nightmare.”

“Give it a few more minutes. They can’t sit out there forever.”

I scoff. “You don’t know how stubborn he can be.”

She’s got her lips pursed and her head cocked to the side. A surefire sign that she’s thinking about something she’s not sure she should say out loud.

“What is it?” I press.

She blinks innocently. “What do you mean?”

“I’m exhausted, Pheeb. Just tell me.”

“I’m just worried, Em,” she whispers. “I’m worried about you out there alone with three—no, *four* children. How are you gonna stay afloat?”

“I’ll admit I haven’t thought that far ahead. But I’ll manage. I’ve saved a good chunk of the money I earned from the... um... contract.”

“Sure, but c’mon. You know babies aren’t cheap, right?”

“What’s the alternative, Phoebe? I can’t stay. Not with Ben around.”

My eyes flit straight to the empty space where the coffee table used to sit. Phoebe and I cleaned up the glass and shoved the skeleton of the table to the side so none of the kids trip through it. Now, there’s just a pathetic, threadbare rug, a few bloodstains, and one really bad memory.

“I wish I could help.”

“You’ve done more than enough, believe me.” I point right at her. “Best. Friend. Ever.”

She smiles and bats her eyelashes playfully, then glances out the window again. “Oh! I think they’re gone.”

I jump out of the sofa and rush to see for myself. “Yes. Finally! I’m gonna go get Josh. Then we can carry the girls down to the car.”

Josh is lying on his stomach on his bed with the curtains pulled right. He’s got his chin resting on his crossed arms as he stares at the blank wall in front of him. I stop short, struck by the haunted expression on his face.

“Josh?” He flinches towards me but goes right back to staring at the wall. I walk over to the side of his bed and kneel down beside it. “Honey, I know you went through something really traumatic today. We haven’t properly talked about it.”

He offers me a tiny glance. “I don’t want to leave New York.”

My heart sinks. “Babe, you know why we have to leave.”

“Why can’t you just get custody of us? You’re already our guardian.”

“I know but I’m afraid the system doesn’t work like that. A biological parent will always get precedence over a guardian.”

Josh shakes his head. “That’s not fair! You and Ruslan are more my parents than Dad has ever been.”

That one feels like iced water down my back. “Josh, just... come here.”

I pull him to me and hold him tight while he breaks down. Sometimes, even I forget just how young he is. Just how much he carries on those small shoulders. I’ll bet having Ruslan around made him feel like he could take a break and be a kid for a change. And now, he’s once again hauling the whole world around on his back.

He’s right—it’s not fair.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper to him. “I’m gonna make it up to you. One day, okay? I promise.” When he finally stops crying, I push him back just enough so that I can see his face. “I know this sucks but right now, we have to make tough decisions. And we have to stick together. You hear me, Josh?”

He nods somberly. “I hear you.”

“Good.” I kiss his forehead. “Let’s go.”

I take Caroline, Phoebe takes Reagan, and Josh holds the apartment door open for us so we can carry them downstairs.

The moment I step out into the street, I feel immediately exposed, as though there’s a hundred pairs of eyes fixed on us right now.

Paranoia, Emma. It’s just paranoia talking.

Except that the last few times I’ve convinced myself of that, I’ve been dead freaking wrong. It wasn’t just the paranoia talking.

It was either Remmy.

Or Ben.

Or Adrik.

Or a freaking black sedan driven by who-the-hell-knows.

Once the girls are strapped into their car seats and Josh is wedged in between them, I shut the door and turn to Phoebe. “Thank you,” I say, pulling her towards me for a quick hug. “Seriously.”

“Keep me posted, okay? I expect updates every few hours. I’ll try to come over tomorrow after work.”

“I don’t know if we’ll be sticking around that long, Pheeb.”

Her eyes go wide. “Seriously? You want to check out tomorrow?”

I shuffle my feet around. “I don’t know. My instincts are telling me that I need to leave as soon as possible. I can’t risk another kidnapping attempt. I can’t risk Ben catching us. I can’t risk Ruslan finding out about this baby.”

“That’s a lot for anyone to deal with,” Phoebe breathes. “You are one badass mama bear.”

“More like a desperate one.”

She puts her hand on my shoulder. “Sienna would be so freaking proud. You know that, right?”

And just like Josh was crying on my shoulder only a few minutes ago, I find myself crying on Phoebe’s.

I have no idea if Sienna would truly have been proud of me. A part of me thinks she’d be more pissed off than proud. I mean, I exposed her kids to a Bratva *pahkan*. Worse still, I’d let them fall in love with him, then snatched them away. I’m also taking them away from their father.

Would she be proud? Or would she look at me and see what I see when I look in the mirror?

Just a lot of wasted potential.

Just another stupid girl who made the mistake of falling for the wrong man.

EMMA

Honk-shoo-honk-shoo-mimimi.

I never thought I'd be grateful for Reagan's silly little snore.

But right now, it's giving me life.

It's giving me hope.

It's giving me something to focus on apart from the terrifying, panicked weight that's parked itself on my chest and is getting heavier by the minute.

I check my watch. It's been twenty-two minutes and Josh still hasn't come out of the bathroom. That's making me nervous, too. If you saw the bathroom in this motel room, you'd know why. It's not the kind of place anyone voluntarily chooses to spend significant time in.

Pretty sure I spotted bloodstains in the tub earlier. I tried to cover them up with the depressing shower curtains that might've been yellow in their heyday but are now a sad, sickly brown.

Long story short: this motel looks like death, smells like depression, and I need to get the kids out of here as soon as I possibly can.

Click. The door opens.

Oh, thank God!

"Josh," I whisper. "You okay?"

He doesn't really meet my eyes and I can tell why: he's been crying. His eyes are puffy, his cheeks are creased, and he's got that tired, far-off look that he had the day of Sienna's funeral.

I'm sitting at the foot of the empty single bed that Josh and I will be sharing tonight. I pat the rough brown carpet next to me and Josh shuffles his feet over.

"I know this is hard. I know this isn't fair. But I wouldn't be doing it if we had any other choice, Josh. You know that, right?"

His bottom lip quivers. "I know why we have to leave Dad," he whispers. "But I was kinda hoping..." He doesn't finish his sentence and I'm relieved. Talking about Ruslan makes me want to burst into tears. At least I have the excuse of hormones to fall back on.

I'm not pining; it's just the hormones. Biology. Completely out of my hands.

I take his hand and he leans a little closer to me. "We have to try and do this by ourselves, okay, hon? It'll be hard at first but, with a little imagination, maybe this can actually be the adventure I promised the girls."

He raises his eyebrows as if to say, *You poor delusional lady, what dream world are you living in?* "Rae and Caro are gonna freak out when they realize that we're not ever going back home. They'll miss their bunk beds and Connie's Creamery and the park."

"I know. God, I know. It's gonna be hard for all of us. That's why we need to be strong."

He leans his head against my arm. "Aunt Emma?"

"Yes."

"I *hate* this place."

I almost smile. "Me, too."

"I think there's blood in the tub."

My stomach twists. "It's tomato sauce."

He picks his head up and looks at me with that expression on his face again.

The *crazy lady* expression. Geez, I really thought I'd have another decade at least before I started getting that look from the kids.

“Okay, it might not be tomato sauce, but for the sake of my sanity and a peaceful sleep tonight, let's pretend it is, deal?”

At long last, he gives me a half-smile. “Deal.”

We pinky swear on that one and Josh's head comes to rest back down on my arm. I know he's falling asleep when his weight starts sinking into my side. I can't carry him on my own anymore but I do manage to sleep-walk him to the bed.

I crawl in next to him, propped up against the one hard pillow that came with this place and close my eyes to drift off into a peaceful REM cycle.

Who the hell am I kidding? I'm not gonna get a peaceful sleep tonight.

Maybe not ever again.

I'm trying to skip town with three confused children. I'm essentially kidnapping them. If Ben decides to be an uber-douche and press charges, I could be facing jail time.

Sienna's voice trickles in through my ear. *They can't put you in jail if they can't find you.*

I'm not exactly making it very difficult. I mean, I'm still in New York, for God's sake. I went to freaking Walmart today. I'm still driving the same old Chevy with the same old license plate. All Ben would have to do is give the cops my plate number and they'd have this motel surrounded by sunrise.

The sedan kidnapers didn't have a license plate at all. They were thinking ahead.

I grimace. You know you've hit a new low when you're taking kidnapping tips from the men who tried to steal your nephew.

I've put my phone on silent, so I don't hear anything apart from a subtle vibration on the shared bedside table between the beds. But then it lights up, throwing an eerie shadow up onto the ceiling.

PHOEBE: *Everything okay?*

EMMA: *Think I'm on the verge of a very real panic attack.*

PHOEBE: *What's wrong?*

EMMA: *Gee, let's see... my life is falling apart at the seams and I have no idea how to hold it all together.*

EMMA: *Why did I think I could do this, Pheeb? I'm a basket case. All three kids are gonna need intensive, lifelong therapy because of me.*

PHOEBE: *Em, they lost their mother young and their father is Ben. They were gonna need intensive therapy anyway.*

PHOEBE: *What's the alternative anyway? Stay in New York and let Ben walk all over you or spend the next three years in court only to lose custody of those kids to that bastard in the end?*

She's not wrong and it does help to put things in perspective. It doesn't stave off the panic but it makes my path forward clear.

Of course I have to leave. There's nothing left for us in New York City anymore. Whatever I did have, I lost.

No job.

No sister.

No Ruslan...

EMMA: *I love you, Pheeb.*

PHOEBE: *Love you, too, badass.*

I put my phone away and stare at the suitcases piled in the corner. Every time a shadow passes by the windows, a shiver runs down my spine.

I probably have a few days before Ben realizes that the kids and I are not coming back. In that short window of opportunity, I need to exchange the car for another so that he won't be able to track the license plate number.

Before I know it, I'm on my feet, adrenaline pulsing through my body. I

could pack up the car right now. We could leave this very night. Then the kids could sleep while I drive us out of New York and into another state. By tomorrow night, we could have a different car.

We could have a different life.

I spend the next hour hustling back and forth between the motel room and the Chevy. I load her up, praying that she's got a couple of hours of heavy driving left in her. We're only a three-hour drive from the Pennsylvania border. Putting New York behind us would be a huge emotional relief, if not necessarily a logistical one.

A car cruises past, its headlights blinding me for a moment. It strikes me as strange that it's moving so slowly.

Strange or suspicious?

The car goes past. A dark car. Maybe blue, maybe black—I can't tell in the darkness. It seems suspect. But then again, so am I.

I probably look shady as all hell, prowling the motel in the dead of night, clearly trying to make a quick getaway.

Just add this to the list of things to talk about in therapy.

By the time I've got the last of the bags packed up, I feel just a little bit steadier. Now, I just need to get the kids in the backseat and off we go.

I shut the trunk. *Is that...?*

I freeze, fear pooling in my stomach. There's a tall silhouette standing not five feet from me. *Oh, God, the keys. I left them on the roof of the car.*

He raises his hand and the keys dangle from his fingers. "Looking for these?"

I know that voice.

I move around the car, my eyes going wide with disbelief when I see who's standing there.

"Good evening, Ms. Carson," Ruslan says casually. "Funny running into you here."

RUSLAN

I can tell the moment she thinks about running from me.

Emma's gaze darts to the right. Then to the left. When I move towards her, she takes a step back. I try not to take it personally but it's strange how that thorn under my skin just gets wedged in deeper.

How can she be so wary of me?

Me, the man who saved her.

Me, the fool who loved her.

"You've been following me," she accuses.

"Your powers of deception aren't quite as honed as you might think, *kiska*," I drawl sarcastically.

"I'm not quite as good of a liar and con artist as you are? Gee, don't flatter me," she fires back with just as much venom.

Grimacing, I glance over her shoulder at the decrepit shithole she chose to house the children. "Of all the places you could have taken them, you chose to bring them *here*."

She bristles. "I did what I had to do. I did my best."

"And this is your best?"

She tries not to react apart from a subtle flinch, but I know I'm getting to her.

I'm just voicing all the doubts she's already got banging around in that stubborn little head of hers. Her forehead vein is telling me so.

"What are you doing here, Ruslan?"

"I could ask you the same thing."

She stiffens. "I want a change."

"One hell of a change you picked."

Her eyes flare with anger. "What the hell do you care? You're done with me, remember? You want me out of your life. Were those not your words?"

The fucking nerve of this woman. To betray me and then have the gall to be pissed off that I reacted, that I found out.

"And I meant every single one," I hiss back. "But I do still care about those kids. And, considering you seem intent on dragging them out of the city in the dead of the night, I have every reason to be concerned."

"You are *not* their father." There's pure poison in every word she spits. "You are not their guardian. You are not their anything. You want me out of your life? Well, right back atcha, buddy."

I take a step towards her, trapping her between me and the passenger side door. "Let me remind you again." I'm whispering at this point but she cringes back as though I'm screaming at her. "I'm not here for *you*."

She looks away from me pointedly but I still catch the glossy sheen of tears in her eyes. She tries to get away but I only press my body in tighter.

"Ruslan," she pants, "let me go."

"Trust me: there's nothing I would like better." Thank God my powers of deception are much better honed than hers because otherwise, she would see right through my bullshit. I don't want to let her go anywhere. "But unfortunately, my world has gotten entangled with yours. I have to make sure that's corrected before I can let you go."

I adjust my position carefully so that she won't notice the throbbing erection that pinning her against the car has caused.

I'm gonna need to find a way to kill this particular beast. It doesn't want to die easily.

"W-what does that mean?" she stammers.

"It means that someone has their eye on Josh. And if they've noticed Josh, they've noticed you and the girls, too. You've got a target on your back, Emma, and I need to take out the motherfucker who's holding the gun."

Her bottom lip trembles. "That'll take too long."

"What are you in such a hurry to get away from?"

"You!"

My scowl deepens. "I'm flattered—but I'm also not buying it."

"It's not so hard to believe," she insists. "When relationships end, people want fresh starts."

"What relationship?" I snarl.

There's that flinch again. There's that throbbing vein. As titillating as our proximity is right now, I don't enjoy hurting her. Every time I do, the beast in me roars in protest. It goes against the grain, to hurt someone you feel you were born to protect.

"Yeah," she says softly. "You're right. We never had a relationship. You were paying me to sleep with you and I was desperate enough to say yes. I was your whore—that's it."

The word sounds so much harsher coming from those sweet pink lips. Lips that I want to consume like a rabid fucking animal.

She cringes the moment she sees the oncoming glare of headlights. Her head cranes to the side as she peers through the darkness. She's so jumpy tonight.

"It's just a passing car."

Her frown doesn't ease. Her gaze stays glued to the car—which, I'll admit, is driving very slow considering the roads are empty at this time of night.

"That car already drove by a few minutes ago."

That sets my spine tingling. No one's about to slow down for a second look at this piece of shit motel. I pull out my gun and she gasps again, her lips parting softly. The squirm of her discomfort just makes my dick throb harder.

“Ruslan—”

“Go inside. Lock the door. Don't come out until I come for you.”

She glances at my raised gun and then to me. “W-what are you going to do?”

“Deal with this.”

She shakes her head. “M-maybe it's just random people... strangers... Maybe this has nothing to do with us...”

“Maybe. But I'm not taking the risk. Now, go!”

She doesn't move. It takes me a moment to register that she's shivering violently. That her eyes are wide with terror and her body seems incapable of moving.

“Emma.” Her eyes flicker to mine but the shaking doesn't stop. I grab her arms and this time, when her eyes land on me, they don't look away. “We don't have time for a panic attack right now. I need you to snap out of this.”

Her lips are still parted.

The headlights flash again.

Yeah... This is not a fucking coincidence.

So I bend down and catch those lips with mine. This time, I swallow her gasp. I kiss her lips raw. It lasts only a few seconds, maybe less, but I make every last one of them count. I go in deep and passionate, forcing life back into her frozen body. She doesn't fight me; she's probably too shocked to do anything but surrender. My body curls around her protectively, stealing a kiss I have no right to anymore.

When I pull back, her eyes are still fixed on me. “Go.”

This time, she listens. She sprints towards the stairs, ascends to the second floor, and disappears into the fourth door on the right. Satisfied that she's safe for now, I turn my attention to the headlights.

I'm too far away and it's too dark to determine how many men I'm dealing with, but Kirill is close by. I shoot him a quick text.

RUSLAN: 92. *Boynton Motel in Cedar Valley. Bring the clean-up team.*

Slightly premature, but I like my odds. I didn't get this far for lack of confidence. I keep my gun at the ready and stay crouched behind the Chevy.

The car has stopped across the street. A moment later, the driver kills the headlights. I duck down and slide around the rear of the while two men exit the truck. They walk across the street towards the motel.

Both men remind me of the two kidnapers from this morning. Too casual to be real threats, but too on edge to be actual civilians. Whoever is sending them wants to keep this under wraps.

I lie in wait, making room for the off-chance that these two men are just random, innocent people with no ulterior motive. Then the shorter man points to the second floor. I follow his finger to see it aimed at...

Door number four.

So much for that theory.

I screw a silencer on my gun and keep inching around the car so that their backs are to me. I have a clear shot at both men but I only need one alive.

I've always been a good shot. But when I'm pissed off, I'm a *great* one. There's something about the anger that gives me tunnel vision. It's like I'm looking through a long lens camera and there's nothing else in the world but my target and me.

Someone—and I have a pretty good idea I know who—thought sending hired assassins after my family was a good idea. That someone is going to find out just how stupid a move that was.

I'm going to send him back so many bodies that the only discernible conclusion to draw will be obvious.

He's going to be next.

RUSLAN

The tall one goes down like a toy soldier.

I might as well have flicked him down with my fingers. He tumbles over, face-first, into the ground without emitting so much as a gasp. His companion doesn't even notice until his question goes unanswered.

"... Jannik? How do you wanna do this...? Jannik?"

I'm already halfway to him when he turns and notices that Jannik's eating cement in a pool of his own blood. As soon as he sees me coming, he pales, twisting around while he fumbles for his gun.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you." He freezes with his hands suspended in mid-air. "Hands up where I can see them."

"W-who are you?"

"The better question is, who are *you*?"

"I-I-I..."

I roll my eyes. "He hired the very best, didn't he?" I mutter under my breath.

Clearly, Adrik didn't think he needed to send his best men to deal with a woman and three children. His fucking mistake. This poor bastard's price to pay.

"Listen..."

“No, *you* listen,” I snarl. “You have five seconds to tell me who hired you or else you’re going to be drinking your own blood just like Jannik there.”

The conflict in his eyes is evident. His gaze darts between me and Jannik, Jannik and me. For a moment, it even veers up to the second floor of the motel.

What should he choose? Self-preservation or certain death?

The joke’s on him, though. He’s facing death either way. I just need to make him believe he has a way out.

“Four seconds.”

He licks his lips. “Listen, man. I’m not who you think I—”

“Three seconds.”

His right hand keeps twitching in place. He’s still got them raised but they’re creeping lower with every passing second.

Don’t be a fucking idiot.

“Two seconds.”

He chooses to be an idiot.

His hand swoops towards his gun but I’ve already taken aim. I pull the trigger and his strangled cry echoes across the empty lot. He grabs hold of his stump of a right wrist with his uninjured hand and holds it up to the light. It’s spouting blood in every direction.

Like I said—I’m a great fucking shot.

I sigh and let my weapon dangle by my side as I saunter closer. “I’m disappointed. I thought you looked like the smarter one. It’s why I chose to kill him instead of you.”

He’s still gawking at the bloody sewer where his hand once was. Even when his legs give out and he drops to his knees, he doesn’t look away. The only indication that he’s even aware I’m there is that he flinches away when I step up to him.

“I’m not a patient man. Nor am I a merciful one,” I growl. “But I’m willing to make an exception tonight—for *your* sake. Tell me who sent you.”

His eyes slide up to mine. They’re wide with disbelief but there’s a little anger creeping in, too. He scowls darkly. “Y-you’re gonna kill me anyway...”

I shrug. “Maybe I will. Maybe I won’t. If you tell me, there’s a chance you might get to live. You might as well play those odds tonight. It’s the most important gamble you’ll ever make.”

His skin is patchy and pale. It looks even worse with all the sweat and blood dripping down his face.

“I-I’ve got kids, man,” he tries.

I squat down in front of him and clutch his destroyed hand. His scream echoes into the empty, unforgiving night.

I look him right in the eye, my voice low and menacing. “Those are *my* kids up there. Those are *my* kids you’re after.”

Every muscle in his face is spasming uncontrollably. “I-I didn’t know that, man... *fuck... please, please... Aaaarghhh!*”

I squeeze his hand until his tears mix with the sweat. He begs for mercy but I’m fresh out tonight.

“An attempt was made on my boy this evening,” I explain to him conversationally, without letting go of his hand. “Those men refused to talk, too, just like you. Now, they’re dead. I gave them the same choice I’m giving you now. Time to choose better than they did.”

He clenches his teeth and I see blood mingling with his saliva. Lights approach from the distance.

That’ll be the clean-up crew. It’s up to this *mudak* whether their services are needed or not.

“If I talk, h-he’ll kill me...”

Honestly, it’s shocking to me that Adrik can inspire this kind of fear. I might

have been impressed if I weren't so damn furious.

"I will kill you," I promise him. "And I'm much, much closer to you right now."

If this idiot tenses any more, he's going to pop his eyeballs right out.

"You have one second," I inform him.

"I ca—"

I pull the trigger, cutting off his refusal prematurely. The bullet lodges itself in his heart and his eyes go glassy almost instantly. I push him onto the asphalt and get to my feet with disgust.

"Piece of shit," I mutter.

When I look up towards door number four, I catch sight of Emma's face at the window. She's staring down at me, the horrified whites of her eyes visible even from here.

Headlights pull into the half-empty lot, drowning out Emma's silhouette with their glare. Kirill leaps out and jogs over to me.

"Dammit. Looks like I missed all the fun."

I use the seat of my pants to wipe off the sticky blood on my hand. "Fucker refused to talk."

Kirill raises his eyebrows. "Same as the kidnappers. Who knew Adrik was capable of running such a tight ship, huh?"

"My thoughts exactly."

"Unless...?"

I arch an eyebrow. "Unless what?"

"Unless we're not dealing with Adrik at all?" Kirill suggests. "Maybe this is someone else entirely."

"No one else has it out for me like Adrik does. No one else *knows* as much as Adrik does. There've been too many coincidences where he's concerned." I

gesture for the clean-up crew. “Get them both out of here before someone notices. I’m going to go get Emma and the kids.”

“What’s the plan?”

“The plan is simple: keep them safe until we figure out who’s moving against me.”

Kirill doesn’t push me for details. He stays behind to supervise the clean-up while I head up the stairs to room number four.

Before I can knock, she opens the door and steps out into the open passage. “You just *killed* two men,” she blurts.

I can understand her panic. She’s only ever been acquainted with the CEO of Bane Corp. The no-nonsense businessman in crisp Tom Ford suits who gets what he wants through cutthroat deals and the subtle art of persuasion.

She’s never really come face to face with the other side of who I am. The ruthless *pahkan* who gets what he wants through brute force, sheer will, and—on particularly messy nights like this one—blood. Lots of it.

I keep my voice soft and calm. “They were here to hurt you and the children. They would have taken the kids and used them as bait. They would have done the same and worse to you. That’s why they had to die.”

She shivers and rubs at her forearms. “Why does anyone have to die?”

There’s something about her innocent questions that I find endearing. I can see the harsh reality of my world through her eyes and it only makes me more determined to keep her and the children safe from it.

I may not like her right now. That’s okay.

I don’t have to like her to protect her.

“Because this is the underworld, Emma. And violence is the one language we all speak fluently. Now, come—we have to go.”

She blanches. “G-go? Where?”

“Back to one of my penthouses for now. Until I find a more permanent location for all of you.”

“You want us to come with you?”

“It’s not safe for you on your own right now.”

Her gaze flashes past me. “I-I’ll leave town. No one will be able to find us. I won’t be your problem. It’s a win-win.”

She takes a step back, as though she’s desperate to start putting distance between us immediately.

What is that in her eyes? Is that fucking distrust? After all I’ve done?

I’m pissed off all over again. Where the fuck does she get off not trusting *me*? I’m not the one who blew up our contract with her fucking double dealing. I’m not the rat. I’m not the snake.

“You don’t know this world, Emma. You don’t understand the men in it. They’re relentless. They won’t stop coming after you. Not until *I* stop them. But that requires time.”

The more I talk, the more terrified she seems. “Ruslan—”

“Those children will never be safe until I handle this situation. Do you really want to subject them to a life on the run? Looking over your shoulder at every turn? Wondering if the man in the corner is looking at you or looking past you? Wondering if every smile and act of kindness comes with bloody strings attached?”

She swallows hard, her eyes glistening with tears.

“I have the resources to protect them, Emma. Let me.” Her mouth falls open; she hesitates. So I go in for the kill. “This is my fault. Those men are after you and the kids because of me. Give me a month to fix it. Give me a month to make the world safe for them again. Then you and I can forget each other ever existed.”

She closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. For a moment, I wonder if she’s praying, and if so, what exactly she’s praying for. Then she opens her eyes again and looks at me. “Okay.”

I nod and follow her into the room to get the kids.

It strikes me, as I hoist a snoring Reagan into my arms, that this might possibly be the worst decision of my life. And still...

I wouldn't take it back for anything.

EMMA

Some silences are dangerous.

Like the one we're in right now. Ruslan at the wheel, driving carefully so that he doesn't wake the three sleeping children in the back. Me, picking at my nails and trying to fight the stupid, stubborn hope that's resurfacing slowly no matter how many times I try to drown it.

That hope keeps saying stupid, stubborn things. Like, *If we have to spend this month together, maybe, just maybe it will change something between us.*

Maybe he'll hear me out.

Maybe he'll believe me.

And if he does those things, then maybe there doesn't have to be a goodbye at the end of this month. Maybe there's a chance I can tell him about this baby and we can raise it together like we planned.

Then again, you know what they say—*the best-laid plans...*

I'm not just blowing smoke here. I'm not creating a narrative out of nothing. *He* was the one who kissed me in the motel parking lot. You can't fake passion like that.

Whenever I think Ruslan isn't paying attention, I sneak a peek at this profile. Those damn cheekbones. They were made for great things. A man with a face like that can't just be an ordinary guy. He can't be a teacher or a plumber or a damn accountant.

I expect that we're headed towards 48th Street. But the route Ruslan is taking points us in the direction of Madison.

The Inner Sanctum?

That's surprising. And it fuels the hope that's kindling in my gut. Sure, he cares about the kids—but maybe they're the excuse he's using to care about me, too?

Kirill helps Ruslan and me take the kids up to the penthouse. I follow the two men as they lead me through the labyrinth of rooms. One bedroom down the hall from the master has a huge, king-sized bed. We pile all three kids there and back out slowly.

Kirill disappears just as quietly as he came, but Ruslan stays behind. He stands by the floor-to-ceiling windows, scrolling through his phone and ignoring me completely.

But it's enough that he's here.

Even though I'm still mad at him and even though a part of me hates him for refusing to believe me, I'd rather him be here than leave us all on our own.

His oaky scent and his stabilizing presence make me feel somewhat relaxed, somewhat safe. I've spent the last few days obsessing about next moves and money and survival. It's nice to know that, for the next month, I can lay my worries at his feet and he'll take care of them.

Even if he doesn't actually want to.

I tiptoe towards the window tentatively. Perhaps this is the beginning of a fragile truce. For the kids' sake. It's all for the kids' sake.

All of the kids.

Including the one in my belly.

I'm not sure how much of my current thought process stems from the hormones and how much stems from the fear of being alone. All I know is that I do *not* want to be alone right now.

Ruslan puts his phone away and my heartbeat kicks up a notch. I feel like a

shy tween at her first party, when the boy she has a crush on happens to bump into her and there's a few minutes of real face-to-face contact.

"The security code is the same. I didn't get a chance to change it since you were last here." His voice is gruff. He speaks as though I was here years ago when it's only been days.

"Okay."

"You're free to change the code if it makes you feel better."

"What if you or Kirill need to come up here?"

"We'll call you directly for the code. Just don't text it to anyone."

"I won't."

The apartment is eerily silent. Even though we're both talking quietly, the sound carries, bridging the distance between us. He turns towards the main door and I feel the panic build.

Don't go.

That weird, piercing discomfort in my belly is happening again. That would be an easy way to get him to stay. Telling him about the secret I'm carrying—quite literally.

No. That's not what I want. That's not what I should do.

"The fridge is stocked and so is the pantry."

"You were expecting this?"

He frowns. "Of course not. This apartment is where I spend most of my time outside of the office. It's stocked for me."

"Oh." My cheeks color instantly. "Right."

"I'll have Kirill bring more supplies in the morning. You can put together a list of all the things you might need and send it over to him."

"I'm not sure he'll appreciate playing errand boy."

Those amber eyes flash to mine. "He'll do whatever the fuck I expect of him."

That is his job. Serving his *pahkan*.”

“Where will you go?” He raises his eyebrows and I start word vomiting all over him. “I mean, you need to sleep, too. And if this is where you spend most of your time, then—”

“I have half a dozen other properties in this city,” Ruslan says, cutting me off. “Any one of them will do.”

“Oh. Okay.” He makes another step towards the exit. “A-and how do I change the security code again?”

He shoots me an impatient glare. “Put in the old access code. Then put in the new code, followed by the pound key.”

“Okay. Six digits, right?”

“Yes.”

“Is there anything—”

“Emma.”

He doesn’t raise his voice but somehow, it feels like he has. My jaw snaps shut and, when he looks at me, it’s like he’s looking *into* me.

“Are you trying to waste my time?”

My heart thuds painfully against my chest. “No, of course not. I was just asking. I forgot.”

“No, you didn’t,” he growls, calling my bluff. “You’re trying to buy more time.”

I don’t even bother denying it because honestly, I already know I’m probably not gonna be very convincing. “I just—”

“Let me make something very clear.” His tone is biting and it makes me feel about this big. “Nothing has changed between us, Emma. You and I are not friends or coworkers or lovers. The only reason you’re here at all is because I refuse to let any harm come to those children on account of me. But as soon as the threat is gone, you will be, too. And I will be happier for it.”

Each word feels like a nail in my coffin. That kiss earlier was just a manipulation, a way to get me to listen to him.

Not gonna lie—it hurts.

I'm not the only one to blame here! I want to shout at his back. But the words are stuck somewhere between my heart and my throat.

They're trapped, just like I am.

He steps into the elevator and turns around. His face is composed of hard lines and not a speck of compassion. "If you need anything, contact Kirill."

The elevator doors close, leaving me to his cold, beautiful penthouse.

My bones ache with exhaustion. My head pounds with stress. But I'm positive I won't be able to sleep just yet.

Which is how I find myself on the carpet in front of the windows, staring off into the city, trying to find the woman I used to be before I pulled the trigger on my own life.

Was it the day I'd signed the contract with Ruslan?

Or maybe it went back before then. Maybe it was the day that I applied for the job at Bane Corp.

A little voice inside my head says it doesn't matter. None of it matters anymore. There's no turning back time.

I lean back on one hand and place my other hand on my belly. So far, I've had no signs of pregnancy apart from that hospital sonogram. I don't feel nauseous or bloated. It's way too early for any movement.

And yet, I have never been more sure of anything. In a little over seven months, I will have a baby. And I will find a way to make it work. Just like I made it work with the other three children that I didn't expect to mother.

Ruslan won't be part of this child's life and that's on him. I'm gonna take my miracles where I get them and love this child for the both of us.

"It's gonna be okay, little duckling."

The term of endearment comes naturally to my lips. Sienna used to use it on me a long time ago, when I was still wetting the bed and crying out from night terrors.

It's okay, little duckling. It's gonna be okay.

I always wet the bed on nights that one of our parents got mad at us. I never stopped to wonder how Sienna felt on those nights. She was so busy mothering me that I simply took it for granted that she was okay.

But maybe she wasn't. Maybe she was just pretending.

I finally know how that feels.

EMMA

I wake up at nine the next morning. Sunlight is streaming in through the open windows.

I fell asleep on the couch, which was intentional on my part. I did *not* want to go back into the master bedroom. I wasn't prepared to face the memories that waited for me there.

Not yet, anyway.

I check my phone to find a text waiting for me.

PHOEBE: *Please tell me you and the kids are okay?*

EMMA: *We're okay. Not at the motel anymore. I'll explain when I process everything.*

I check in on the kids, who are still fast asleep in the guest room. Yesterday was probably more chaos than their little bodies could take. I'm heading into the kitchen when I hear the elevator doors ping open.

How pathetic is it that my very first thought is, *Ruslan*? And it's not like that thought is combined with dread or nerves or nausea. Honestly, I'd welcome any of the three. It's preferable to feeling like the idiot who can't help pining after a man who clearly doesn't give a shit about her.

"Morning," Kirill says breezily as he exits the elevator with two massive bags thrown over each shoulder. "You didn't change the passcode."

I shrug. “Didn’t think it was necessary.” *And I was bogged down deep in depression last night.* “What’s in the bags?”

“Groceries.”

I follow him into the kitchen. “The kitchen’s already fully stocked.”

He huffs as he drops the bags down on the sleek marble center island. “But those girls have a serious sweet tooth and Uncle Kiki is gonna pretend to be Willy Wonka for today. I have sugar bomb cereal for Rae, whipped cream by the boatload for Caro, PB&J supplies for PB&Josh... you get the picture.”

He starts pulling items out of the bag. I do one double-take after another when I see all of our favorite treats go sprawling across the countertop.

“How did you know what to get?”

He gives me a quick, *you-know-how* glance. “Ruslan gave me a list.”

Right. Of course he did.

“You didn’t have to do all this.”

“You guys need to eat. And anyway—orders.”

I nod glumly. “Does that get old? Always having to take his orders?”

Kirill smiles cryptically. “I know what I signed up for, Emma.” *Is that meant to be a dig at me?* “By the way, we’re gonna have the Modani crew coming up here around noon. Just giving you a heads up.”

I blink. “Sorry, am I supposed to know who that is?”

“Modani—the furniture company...?”

“My furniture company is IKEA.”

He smirks. “This apartment is a little bare-bones and Ruslan wanted you guys to be comfortable. So they’re gonna set up two rooms for the kids so that Josh doesn’t have to bunk with his sisters tonight. One of their interior designers will be coming, too, to oversee stuff. Her name’s Elise. You can tell her whatever you want done to the master bedroom.”

I grab the box of Oreos and tear into them. “I’m not gonna do that, Kirill. I’m not even sure I should be sleeping in the master bedroom. I’m fine on the couch, honestly.”

“Don’t be silly. If you don’t want the master bedroom, there are three more guest rooms to choose from. Just pick the furniture you like from the catalog Elise brings and they’ll deliver by tomorrow at the latest.”

I stuff an Oreo into my mouth and reach for another before I’m even done with the first.

“You alright there, pal?” Kirill asks.

He keeps looking at me funny. He probably smells the crazy on me.

“Just a little overwhelmed. I’m gonna go lie down.” I take the box of Oreos with me and settle on the couch, completely prepared to be a hermit for the rest of the day. Of course, that plan is shot to hell when the kids wake up.

But it’s a good distraction. They scamper around the penthouse, *ooing* and *ahhing* at every room in the place. Josh is the only one who shows a modicum of restraint. But that’s probably only because he’s still traumatized from yesterday. He shrugs off all my attempts to ask how he’s feeling.

The Modani crew shows up right when Kirill said they would. That takes up most of the day. And when they leave, we receive another delivery that turns out to be toys for each kid. Model trains and Legos for Josh. Dolls and tea party sets for Caroline and Reagan. Books for everyone. It’s over the top and then some, but seeing each kid smile forces me to bite my tongue.

I don’t have the right to deprive them of this. Maybe it’ll make things harder when we’re on our own. But I’d rather allow them a taste of this life rather than nothing at all.

I spend the evening getting dinner ready and fielding questions from the kids.

Where’s Ruslan?

Why didn’t he come to see us today?

Will he come see us tomorrow?

They're all Ruslan-centric questions and it makes me second-guess my decision to stay here all over again.

In short, I'm a mess. Not even a hot mess. Just a stinky, slovenly, messy mess.

By the time I get the kids to bed, I've worked myself into quite the state. So I curl up in the corner of one of the guest bedrooms with a blanket over my shoulders and a churning in my gut and call Phoebe.

"Where are you?" Phoebe breathes the moment she picks up.

"Believe it or not, still in New York."

"*What?*" she yelps.

I'm not expecting that reaction. She sounds unreasonably panicked by that little tidbit. It has the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end.

"Y-yeah. After what happened with Josh yesterday, Ruslan insisted we stay in New York under his protection."

Silence.

"Pheeb? What aren't you telling me?"

"Um... I guess I was just hoping you'd be far away by now."

Yeah, okay. Something's *definitely* wrong. Phoebe would never hope that unless she had a good freaking reason to.

"Why?"

"Em—"

"*Please*, Phoebe. I've had a rough day and I think there's a few more of those on the horizon. So just tell me."

She clears her throat. "It's Ben." My heart plummets. "He filed a missing person's report for all four of you."

You've got to be fucking kidding me.

"I'm guessing you haven't turned on the news today?"

“He was on the news? Fuck me! Who has the pull to get him on—”

And then it hits me. So obvious I can’t believe I didn’t think of it already.

Beatrice and Barrett.

They have the resources and the connections to get Ben on TV, spouting off God knows what about the three children he barely looked at even when they *were* around.

“My parents! My freaking parents. It has to be them. Were they on, too?”

“Not that I saw. The cameras seemed locked in on Ben.”

“It’s only a matter of time. They’re gonna wanna capitalize on the spotlight.”

“C’mon, hon, do you really think they’d—”

“Of course they would!” I explode. “Of course they would, Phoebe. They’ve wanted to get their paws on these kids since Sienna died. Since *before* Sienna died. Anything to correct the mistakes they made with us. Anything to get another set of trophy kids.”

“Honey, I think you’re spiraling—”

Goddamn right I’m spiraling. It’s frankly amazing I’ve stayed calm this long.

I toss off the blanket and leap to my feet. “What was he saying?” I demand. “On the news, I mean, what was he saying? Who interviewed him? Did they—you know what, it doesn’t matter. What did he say? What bullshit did he go with?”

Phoebe sighs. “The whole bereaved father schtick,” she admits. “It was truly nauseating. He cried and everything.”

Apparently, my morning sickness is triggered by assholes, because this is the moment it hits. I drop back to the couch and put my head between my knees.

“This is bad, Pheebs. This is so, so bad.”

“Hey now, calm down. Ruslan will be able to get you out, right?”

“Until he deals with this threat to me and the kids, he’s not gonna let me go

anywhere. He asked for a month to make things right and I stupidly agreed. But now, I don't even have a day to spare. Especially if Ben's out there spinning bullshit about me." My pacing slows as something else hits me. "Wait—did he mention me in the interview today? Were the words 'kidnapping' and 'bitch sister-in-law' bandied about?"

She hesitates for a second. "You were mentioned only in the context of another missing person—"

"My parents' doing," I deduce. "They won't want a criminal daughter to have to explain in their snobby society circles."

"They're not gonna be able to control the narrative forever, Em. In any case, Ben's a loose cannon. They're gonna have a tough time reining him in once he gets a taste for the spotlight."

Just when I thought things couldn't get any worse.

"I have to leave, Phoebe. I have to leave *now*. If he even suspects that I'm pregnant—"

"Jesus, Emma! Take a breath—"

"I can't take a breath! I don't have the time. They're after me. They're all fucking after me and if I don't move now, they're gonna catch me. They're gonna take my kids. Ben will take Josh, Caro, and Rae and Ruslan will take my baby! I can't let them do that, Phoebe."

"I know. I know." Her voice is soothing but I can sense her panic. Or maybe it's my own. Who the hell knows at this point? What difference does it make?

All I know is that I can't stay here in this gilded prison. I can't allow myself to be jailed, no matter how much I may care about my jailer.

My kids trump everything and everyone else.

"I've got to go."

"Emma, please—be careful."

"I love you, Pheeb."

I hang up abruptly and turn to the door. My blood runs cold when I see who's

standing in the threshold, his piercing eyes fastened on me.

“K-Kirill—how long have you been standing there?”

EMMA

HOW LONG HAS HE BEEN STANDING THERE?

The answer is clearly *“too fucking long.”*

He walks in and sits down on the edge of the new bed that I haven't broken in yet. For someone who's potentially just heard all my secrets, he looks pretty damn composed.

Maybe, by some miracle, he didn't hear the part where—

“Don't look so scared, Emma. I already knew.”

Since I've given away enough already, I decide to make him say it. “Knew what?”

He smirks and crosses his leg in a figure-four. “I know you're pregnant. I know you're carrying Ruslan's baby.”

That's it then. It's all over.

I drop the pretense. “Are you gonna tell him?”

Kirill strokes his chin. “I did try. But he's not real open to talking about you these days.”

There's a lot to unpack in that sentence but I focus on the most troubling. “Y-you tried to tell him already?”

“Like I said, I already knew you were pregnant.”

“*How?*”

“I pulled your medical files,” he explains unapologetically. “The day you landed in the hospital with cuts all over your body.”

“That’s my private information!”

He shrugs. “I had to make sure you were alright.”

“*Why?*” I demand. “Your boss has made it perfectly clear that he doesn’t give a shit about me. So why would you?”

“Because, even though he’s my boss, he’s also my friend. And I know what he wants even when he won’t admit it.”

“Which is what?”

“He wants you to be safe, for starters.”

My insides churn. I *so* want to believe that. But Ruslan’s words are still burning in my ears. He was just a little too convincing last night.

“Kirill, you can’t tell him. If he knows—

He holds up a hand to soothe me. “Breathe. I don’t plan on telling him.”

That brings me to a screeching halt. I genuinely thought it would take much more convincing than that. “You don’t?”

“There’s a lot going on right now. Maybe it’s better not to drop this information bomb into the middle of it.”

I nod, trembling. “Thank you.”

“But I do think you should be the one to tell him—eventually.”

My lips compress into a hard line. “No.”

“He deserves to know.”

“Does he?” I snap. “Because from where I’m standing, I’m not sure he deserves a fucking thing from me.” Kirill lofts his eyebrows and I loathe the judgment in that gesture. “I did *not* sell information to Remmy Jefferson! I know that’s what you both believe, but it’s not true. I would never do that.” His arched eyebrows settle down a fraction of an inch as I leap to my feet and

start pacing around. “*Ben* is the one who started snooping around in my car. Which is where I hid the contract because I was so scared he’d stumble onto it if I kept it in my room. And since Remy was snooping around in general... well, you can see how the two would cross paths eventually. That’s how Remy got his hands on the contract. Ben handed it right to him.”

Kirill still doesn’t say a word and that pisses me off. So I just keep talking. “Whatever you might believe, I *do* care about Ruslan. I would never have put that information out there. I wouldn’t even dare to—”

“I believe you.”

I stop short. “W-what?”

He leans back and picks some imaginary lint off his pants. “As explanations go, yours makes sense.”

I stare at him for a moment and then sigh. “Yeah, try telling your stubborn ass boss that.”

Kirill chuckles. “Telling him anything now is pointless. He’s too inside his own head. Without proof—”

“Why does he even need proof?” I cry out. “Why can’t he just take my freaking word for it?”

“Because that requires trust, Emma. He let you in. He let you in far past his own personal boundaries of comfort and now, he’s trying to overcompensate for that by kicking you all the way the fuck out.”

“Sounds like I’m not the only one who needs a therapist.”

Kirill shrugs. “That might be true of all of us.”

I eye him warily, wondering just how much I can trust him. It’s not as though I have much of a choice, though. Trustworthy allies aren’t exactly forming a line at my door.

“Kirill, you heard most of that conversation, right?” He nods, so I add, “Well, then you understand why I have to leave—”

“Leaving is not an option. I understand things are heating up with Ben, but

Ruslan and I can handle that.”

I frown. “You can ‘handle’ that? Kirill, Ben’s being interviewed by CNN. Morning shows and shit. The man’s crying wolf about his missing children all over the news.”

“Like I said, I’ll handle it. You don’t have to worry about Ben.” He stands, straightens his cuffs, and walks over to me with a palm outstretched. “But for right now, it’s important that you’re not contactable.”

I stare at the open palm he’s offering me. “Are you asking for my hand? Because we really don’t know each other that well.”

He cracks a momentary smile. “Your phone, Emma.”

I back away from him in horror. “No.”

“Do you really wanna deal with Ben right now? Or your parents? Or more reporters?”

“Fuck me,” I mutter. “You really know how to make a compelling case, don’t you?” Reluctantly, I deposit my phone in his hand.

“I’ll get you a new phone and a new number. Also, I wanted to let you know that I’ll be monitoring the security cameras inside the penthouse.”

I look around. “There are security cameras *inside* here? That feels a bit invasive.”

“They’re not in any of the bedrooms or bathrooms. Just the common living spaces. Don’t worry, Ruslan’s in no danger of hearing that conversation you just had with your friend.”

“Funnily enough, that doesn’t make me feel a whole lot better.”

That’s not quite true, though. One thing is making me feel better: that maybe I’m not *completely* alone. I have the kids. I have Phoebe. Maybe I have Kirill on my side, too.

“Kirill?” I blurt. “Why are you helping me?”

A shadow falls over his face so I can’t quite read his expression. “It seems like you could use a little help,” he says carefully.

Amen to that.

“I know that’s what you want me to believe, but I know Ruslan will always be your first priority.”

He doesn’t deny it. “Perhaps. But that baby in your belly is my second. You’re carrying the future *pahkan* of the Oryolov Bratva. That means you are my priority, too.”

I frown. I’m not sure how I feel about any of that but I can’t afford to turn my nose up at a possible ally. Even if that alliance only lasts the duration of my pregnancy.

At this point, I’ll take what I can get.

EMMA

That evening, I get a thick brown envelope addressed to me from Kirill. It contains my new phone, a slip of paper with several numbers on it, a restraining order against Ben, and the most important thing of all: official court documents granting me temporary physical and legal custody of all three children.

There's a handwritten note, too. *I've spoken to a cop that we work with closely. He can make the missing persons reports go away. We're gonna work on proving that Ben is an unfit guardian. Until then, you've got custody of the kids. –Kirill.*

I'm reading through the note for the fourth time when the kids tumble into the kitchen clamoring for dinner.

"Auntie Em? You okay?" Josh asks as he slows to a walk.

"Yeah, honey. Just got some good news."

"What is it? What is it?" Reagan chirps as Josh helps her up onto one of the high chairs around the island.

"Well, for right now, I have guardianship of you guys."

Rae wrinkles her nose up. "What does that mean?"

"It means that I get to look after you guys."

She doesn't look impressed. "But that's what you do now."

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” I give Josh a wink. “But now, it’s officially official.”

“I don’t get it,” Reagan says with a shrug. “Caro, do *you* get it?”

“*Nuh-uh.*”

“See, Auntie Em? *No one* gets it.”

Still giggling, I walk around to the stove where I’ve been shallow frying fish sticks for the kids. I spoon them on a flat plate and set it on the marble countertop.

“Fish sticks!” Reagan celebrates. “Yayyy!”

Caroline nods in enthusiastic agreement. “I love this place.”

I plop down beside Josh. “Listen, guys, I know you like it here—but it’s just temporary, okay? We can’t stay forever.”

“Why not?” Reagan asks. “Ruslan won’t mind.”

Where did all that certainty come from? How did he manage to convince them in such a short time that he is so utterly devoted to them?

“Ruslan lives in New York, honey,” I say gently. “And we need to leave it.”

“But why?”

“Because...” *Breathe, Emma. You can do this.* “Because I think it’s important that we make a fresh start somewhere new. Just the four of us.”

Caroline and Reagan exchange a confused glance. “But Auntie Em, what about Daddy?” Caroline asks.

I swallow. “Guys, your daddy... He’s going through something right now. He’s not really able to take care of you guys.”

Reagan frowns. “Is that why he’s so mad all the time?”

“That’s part of it, yes.”

Reagan’s little rosebud mouth turns down. “So... we’re not gonna see Daddy again?”

“I think probably not for a very long time, honey,” I admit. The honesty hurts even me to say, but we’ve had enough lies around here. I won’t raise them in the dark. They deserve to know as much as they’re capable of handling. And if I know anything, it’s that Sienna’s kids are strong.

Both girls look contemplative, unsure how to process that information. Ben’s always been around even if he wasn’t present. Even if he wasn’t always nice.

“I’m gonna draw Daddy a card,” Reagan pipes up abruptly. “A *get well soon* card. How’s that, Auntie Em?”

I swallow the lump in my throat and nod. “I think that’s a great idea, Rae. What about you, Caro? You wanna make a card for Daddy?”

She shakes her head. “No. He wasn’t always nice to Josh. Or Rae. Or me. I don’t wanna make him a card.”

I pat her hand. “Don’t worry; you don’t have to.”

“I’d rather make a card for the baby!” she adds.

I freeze. “W-what?”

Caroline transforms into a little bobblehead doll for a moment, blond bangs flapping on her forehead. “That’s a great idea right? I’m gonna do it.”

“Um, Caro, sweetheart... what baby are you talking about?”

“*Your* baby, silly!”

Just when the situation feels like it’s halfway under control, *this* happens. Aaand I’m back to square one.

Panic.

Fear.

Nerves.

“Yeah, that’s what the nurse in the hospital said,” Caroline babbles. She’s beaming from ear to ear. “Joshie said we shouldn’t say anything until...” She trails off when she realizes her big brother is glaring at her. “Oops!” She slaps her hands over her mouth. “I wasn’t supposed to say anything until you

told us. Josh said.”

I glance at Josh. “We heard the nurses talking,” he admits quietly. “I wasn’t sure if it was real or not. Are you having a baby?”

Forget what I just said about raising them with honesty—lying would be so much easier now. Of course, the moment my belly starts to pop, I’ll have some serious explaining to do.

They need to know they can trust you. Especially now.

“I *am* going to have a baby.”

Josh’s eyes go wide and the girls start whooping instantly. “I want a girl! I want a girl!” Caroline sing-songs.

“*No!*” Reagan snaps adamantly. “A boy!”

“Guys, *listen.*” It takes a while before the girls calm down. “Aunt Emma isn’t gonna have this baby for a really long time, okay? So I think it’s better, for right now, to keep it our little secret.”

The girls agree easily enough but Josh looks at me almost... accusingly? Almost... angrily?

No—I’m reading too much into it.

He’s just processing.

I hope.

RUSLAN

“... that model is too small. Let’s go for the bigger one. They’ve got a ton of books already and they’ll need the storage space.”

As Kirill jabbers, I rap my fingers against my desk impatiently. But he doesn’t seem to notice; he paces in front of me, listening and talking rapidly.

When he finally puts his phone down, I glare at him, waiting for an explanation. He calmly takes the chair opposite me, a sheepish expression on his face. “Should we talk about the security footage from Alcazar? There were a few anomalies—”

“What the fuck was that about?”

He tilts his head to the side. “What do you mean?”

I hate it when he plays dumb. Scowling, I narrow my eyes. “Kirill.”

He sighs. “Just getting some furniture in for Emma. She chose to camp out one of the guest bedrooms instead of the master. It needed furniture, so she ordered a couple of things. I’m just coordinating with the delivery team.”

I run a hand over my stubble jaw. “Glad to see she’s making herself comfortable.”

“Hey, it took some convincing on my part. I’m the one who told her to order whatever she wanted and said I would have it delivered.”

I glower at him. “Aren’t you ever-so-fucking generous with my money?”

I don't know why I'm being a dick. The truth is, I don't like the familiar way in which he refers to Emma. I don't like the fact that he's attempting to make her feel comfortable in *my* home as though it's *his*. I don't like the fact that he's talked to her more in the last twenty-four hours than I have.

If this is what jealousy feels like, I want no fucking part of it.

"It's not your money."

My eyes snap to his. "What does that mean?"

"Exactly what I said. I wouldn't use your accounts without your permission."

"Then *whose* money are you using?"

"Mine, of course."

What the fuck? "You're using your own money to get Emma settled into the penthouse?"

"Kids need stuff, Ruslan." He doesn't look apologetic in the slightest. "They're gonna be cooped up in that apartment for fuck knows how long. I wanted them to be entertained."

"They've got three TVs to do the job."

"They need books, toys, puzzles. They also need storage space for those things. I'm just making sure they have everything they need. I believe that order came from *you*."

It did; I just didn't think Kirill would run with it the way he has. "There's no need to use your money. Use one of my accounts."

"It's fine," Kirill replies flippantly. "I've got it covered."

He's got it covered. The beast inside me roars possessively. No other man should be taking care of Emma's needs but me. Even if it is as inconsequential as bedsheets and extra towels.

"If anyone's gonna cover the cost of Emma's needs, it's me."

He's quiet for a moment, face neutral. *If he smiles, I'm gonna fucking punch it right off of him.* Lucky for him, he doesn't. "Alright. Whatever you say,

boss.” He whistles under his breath as his gaze sweeps around the room and he twiddles his thumbs in his lap. When his eyes finally meet mine again, he exhales. “Brother, if you stare at me any longer, you’re gonna bore a hole through my face.” He uncrosses his legs. “Something bothering you?”

“How often do you go over to the penthouse?”

“Which one?”

“Don’t be cute.”

He chuckles. “Every morning. Unless, of course, Emma needs something and then I’ll drop by in the evening, too.”

“Stay long, do you?”

He knows where I’m going with this but he doesn’t skip a beat before he answers. “Sometimes. The kids get bored being cooped up indoors all the time. Spent an hour with them yesterday building a Lego castle.”

That’s my fucking territory is my first thought.

My second is, *Am I that easily replaced?*

“It was actually pretty fun,” he continues nonchalantly. “Those girls are hilarious. I don’t know how Emma juggles all three. She’s really got a way with them, though.”

“Seems they’re not the only ones she’s got a way with,” I rumble.

Kirill rolls his eyes. “You serious, man?”

“You do seem to enjoy spending time with them,” I point out. “Did you stay for dinner?”

Kirill cocks his head to the side. The bastard’s fucking goading me now. “Emma was making roast chicken. What was I supposed to do, say no?”

“Yes,” I hiss. “That’s exactly what you’re supposed to do. She’s fucking *using* you.”

I burst out of my chair and storm to the door.

“Where are you going?” Kirill calls out after me.

“To put a fucking stop to it,” I yell back.

By the time I get to the Madison penthouse, I’ve worked myself up into a frenzy. I should have known better. The woman played me like a piano in order to sell me out to the sleaziest goddamn reporter in New York City. Of course she’s capable of this.

Fool me once—shame on you.

Fool me twice—and you better fucking watch your back because I’m gonna make you pay.

I walk over to the elevators imagining all the different ways I’d punish her. *Maybe I’ll choke her with my cock. Maybe I’ll slap her ass raw. Maybe I’ll tie her to the bed with a vibrator strapped to her thigh and leave her there ‘til morning.* The thoughts whizz through my head, each reinforced with a very vivid memory of doing something very, very similar once upon a time.

I punch in the access code furiously.

ACCESS DENIED.

Fucking hell. She’s locked me out of my own apartment. Sure, I told her she could, but still—not the right time.

I tap in the direct number for the penthouse and listen as the line rings. A moment later, Josh answers. “Kirill, is that you?”

I see red until I clear my throat. “It’s me, Josh.”

“Ruslan!”

ACCESS GRANTED.

That was fast. No follow-up questions. *No are you really Ruslan or are you just pretending to be so that you can gain access to the penthouse and come abduct us all?*

I’m gonna have to have a chat with that kid.

Right after I have a chat with his aunt.

Except she's nowhere to be seen when I march into the entry gallery. Josh is the only one waiting for me. "I knew you'd come sooner or later!" he crows in delight.

It's enough to make me feel terrible for staying away this long. Emma deserves to be punished. Doesn't mean the kids do. Although my decision to stay away had less to do with punishing Emma and more to do with trying to rein in my weaker instincts.

Kissing her that night at the motel from hell was a mistake. It opened up a whole Pandora's box that I need to shut back down again. The only way I've figured out to do that is distance.

And masturbation.

Lots of both.

"Where's Emma?" I grit out past my clenched teeth.

"She'll be out soon. She's in her room, I think. You want something to drink?"

"Just water," I say, if only to get myself some distance from the hope in his eyes.

A few seconds after he's disappeared into the kitchen, the girls find me in the living room. "Ruslan!" they cry in unison. I'm tackled around the waist and as per usual, take a glancing hit to the balls before either one calms down.

"How've you two been?"

Caroline smiles. "Good! Uncle Kiki brings us new toys every day."

Uncle Kiki. Yeah. That's gonna have to stop.

"Where's your aunt?"

Reagan's little bottom lip sticks out. "She's sick. She's throwing up all over the bathroom."

"Ew, Rae. Don't be gross."

"But it's *true*."

“I’m sure it’s just a stomach bug,” I comfort Rae, running my hand over her downy hair.

“It’s not a stomach bug!” she insists passionately. “It’s the baby. The baby’s making Aunt Emma puke all over the bathroom.”

“Reagan!”

My eyes snap up to find Josh by the entry way with my glass of water. His jaw is hanging open.

So is mine.

Did she just say baby?

Reagan looks between me and Josh. She’s chewing on her bottom lip like Emma does when she’s nervous. “Oh no... it was supposed to be a secret. Don’t tell Aunt Emma I told you, okay, Ruslan? Please? Pretty please?”

My gaze veers to Josh again. His expression is all the confirmation I need.

For fuck’s sake.

Emma is *pregnant*.

And she was gonna skip town without telling me.

Yeah? Well, she can kiss that plan goodbye. Because she’s not leaving in a month.

She’s not leaving *ever*.

I turn and storm out of the penthouse immediately. As I go, I pick up my phone and dial Kirill’s number. “Called to compliment me on making such a fantastic Lego castle?” he says when he answers. “Or is this an apology call for being such an asshole earlier?”

“I’m transferring Emma and the kids to my estate,” I snap instead of answering his questions. “Make the necessary arrangements. They’ll be moving in tomorrow.”

There’s a beat of silence. “Sure thing, boss. Everything okay?”

Great fucking question.

I wish I had an answer to it.

EMMA

The morning sickness has officially hit with a vengeance.

And boy, is it frigging awful. I can't even keep down Nutella on toast. You know shit's getting real when your system rejects gooey chocolate on warm, toasted bread.

So I've been sprawled miserably on the sofa with a hot pack over my forehead, trying to get Rae to tell me why she's been allergic to me all morning.

"Can I get a hug at least?" I ask as she scampers past.

"No!" she screams before running into her bedroom. A second later, I hear the door slam.

I glance at Josh. "What's up with her today?"

Josh gives me a noncommittal shrug that makes me think there's definitely something going on there.

"She's just scared, Aunt Em," Caroline offers.

"Scared?" I put the hot pack aside and sit up. "Scared about what?"

Now, Caroline looks like she's caught Reagan's allergy to me. She backs away slowly, her eyes skidding from one side to the other. "Um... I dunno..."

Then she leapfrogs over one of the footstools and follows Reagan to the room. I bite my lip. Maybe I should invest in therapy sooner rather than later.

“Josh, is there something going on I should know about?” Like his sisters, he’s not looking me in the eye. “Sweetheart, you know you can tell me anything, right?”

He nods.

“Is this about the kidnapping? Or are the girls missing Ben?”

Josh just shakes his head. “That’s not it.”

“Well, *something*’s up. I feel like I have a bad case of the cooties.”

He smiles but it’s a half-hearted one. “I’ll go talk to them.”

He slips away and I’m left in the empty vastness of the living room. I remember being enamored by the views when I first saw them. But as it turns out, even the most beautiful view loses its appeal when you know you can’t be a part of it.

Maybe what’s going on with the kids is a simple case of boredom. They’ve been cooped up indoors for too long. They need grass and fresh air and the sound of other people.

I pick up my new phone. It feels foreign in my hand. Too big, too heavy, too sleek, and too silver. I miss my old phone. The one with the cracked screen and the fuzzy display.

EMMA: *Hey. Is it possible to get a child therapist to come in a few days a week? I think it might help the kids to talk to someone.*

KIRILL: *We can discuss it.*

Hmm. I had expected a quick and easy yes on that one. Unless he’s thinking of running it by Ruslan first...

Which is super annoying.

EMMA: *When?*

KIRILL: *When you’re settled in at the estate.*

EMMA: *Excuse me. What estate?*

KIRILL: *I'll fill you in on the details when I see you. I'll be there in ten.*

EMMA: *I'd rather you tell me now. We're leaving the penthouse?*

He doesn't respond. I notice him typing but then the three dots disappear and he goes offline.

EMMA: *Kirill.*

EMMA: *Kirill???*

Okay. This day is pissing me off. Everything feels just a little bit off-kilter. Like I woke up on the wrong side of the bed or something. Maybe it's just the morning sickness. Speaking of...

Urgh.

I race to the nearest bathroom and puke up the glass of lemonade I spent the last half an hour gingerly sipping. So much for tricking my body into accepting some calories. When I come back outside, Josh is standing in the living room with the girls. Caroline is on the divan and Reagan is hiding behind her brother.

I smile. "Uh-oh. This looks serious."

Not one kid returns the smile.

I lower myself down to the sofa and face all three with the same somberness they're directing at me. "Starting to get nervous here, guys."

"Aunt Emma, Reagan has something she wants to tell you," Josh explains, taking Reagan's hand and pulling her forward.

"But you have to *promise* not to get angry with her," Caroline chimes in.

My eyes go wide and I look right at Reagan, who actually flinches back. "Honey, I could never be angry with you. You're one of my two favorite nieces."

That one usually gets a smile. Today—nothing.

“Whoa. Tough crowd.” I take a deep breath and hold my hand up, palm facing Reagan. “I solemnly swear that I will not get mad at Reagan for whatever it is she’s done.”

“I didn’t *do* anything,” Reagan says earnestly. “I *said* something bad.”

I try not to smile too hard. “Oh, sweetheart, did you say a bad word? Because I’ll tell you right now, it’s okay. We all slip sometimes. Just don’t do it again.”

Her frightened stance doesn’t change. “I didn’t say a bad word. I... I told a secret.”

I’m not overly concerned. I mean, we’ve been cooped up in here for days. The only person they’ve really hung out with lately is Kirill and he already knows my secret.

“What secret, Rae?”

Beep, beep, beep.

“Oh, hold on—that’ll be Kirill. Josh, honey, can you let him up?” I turn my attention back on Reagan. “Go on, sweetheart.”

Her chubby little cheeks sag under the weight of her remorse. “I told Ruslan about the baby in your belly.”

For a second, I don’t react. Then I laugh. “How can you have told Ruslan? You haven’t seen him in days.”

Caroline shakes her head. “He came over last night.”

I frown, my eyes swiveling towards Josh. “He did, Aunt Em. You were in the bathroom puking.”

Slowly, it starts to sink in. Reagan told Ruslan that I had a baby in my belly. *While* I was throwing up in the bathroom.

Last night.

Oh, God.

Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God.

“I’m really sorry, Auntie Em.” Reagan’s eyes are watery with tears and I realize that my reaction is not helping.

“I-it’s okay, baby,” I insist, even though I’m dying inside. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Are you mad at me?”

How can I be mad at a five-year-old? Who expects a five-year-old to keep that kind of secret? Or any kind of secret? I should’ve known this was coming sooner or later. I just wish it hadn’t been quite this soon.

“Of course not. Not mad. Not mad at all.” My voice is a little too high-pitched to be believable. I need to calm the fuck down. “Why don’t you guys head into the kitchen? Lunch is on the counter.”

They scurry along and I start pacing frantically.

Ruslan *knows*. Why hasn’t he confronted me about it? Why hasn’t he reacted? Is he going to punish me? Trap me? Give me the silent treatment until the baby pops out?

I stop short when the elevator doors open and Kirill walks in. So *that’s* why the sudden change of location.

Be cool, Emma. Be cool.

“Hey.”

God, I sound stiff.

Kirill raises his eyebrows. “Where are the kids?”

“Just having lunch. The smell of meat makes me want to puke so I’m just staying out of the kitchen ‘til they’re done.”

“Well, I just wanted to tell you to start packing. The car will be here at nine tomorrow morning to take you to the Oryolov Estate.”

I give him a polite nod. “And why are we being moved there?”

His expression is ridiculously convincing. If I didn’t know any better, I’d think it was all run-of-the-mill stuff happening here. *Standard protocol for*

victims of kidnappings, extortion attempts, and the like. “The kids will have free run of the place. There’s huge gardens and a pool and—”

“This is a *trap!*”

So much for being cool.

Kirill startles. “Um...”

“He *knows*. That’s why he’s moving us.”

He sighs. “Five-year-olds, I assume?”

“You weren’t gonna tell me. You were just gonna give me a bunch of bullshit excuses for why we were moving.”

He shrugs, not even bothering to deny it. “I figured if Reagan hadn’t told you, then—”

“I thought we were *friends*.”

“We *are* friends, Emma. But I still have a job to do. Part of that job involves keeping you safe. And this move will accomplish that.”

“Bullshit. He’s never gonna let me out of that place. I’ll be a prisoner for life.”

“Emma—”

“No! Don’t you ‘Emma’ me. I should have known better than to trust you.” I fold my arms over my chest. “I’m not going anywhere.”

His voice is low and gentle. “I’m afraid this is nonnegotiable.”

I scowl at him helplessly. “He asked me for a month; I gave him a month. That’s all I’m prepared to give.”

“That’s for you and Ruslan to decide together.”

I snort incredulously. “*Right*. Because Ruslan’s totally the kind of guy who believes in mutual decisions and compromise.”

“I know this is hard—”

“I need to get the kids out of here.”

“You need to keep the kids *safe*,” he reminds me. “And staying with Ruslan is the easiest way to ensure their safety. You know that. I know you know that.”

I turn away from him with a snuffle. It doesn't really matter what I know.

The decision has already been made for me.

EMMA

When Kirill said estate, he really meant *estate*.

The place is ginormous. It's sprawled over acres, surrounded by fifteen-foot walls that pale in comparison to the grounds they protect. It's hard to believe we're only an hour from Manhattan. The lush greenery of Oyster Bay Cove feels like another state entirely.

Once we pass the first layer of security, which involves Fort Knox-esque levels of steel gates and grim-faced security guards, it's a three-minute and twenty-seven-second drive to the mansion, which I know because Caroline dutifully counts off every one of those seconds.

Who takes that long to get to their front door from their front gate?

Ruslan Oryolov. That's who.

Not that I'm impressed. Oh, no. I'm disgusted. This kind of wealth is... It's obscene. It's ridiculous. It's egotistical. It's—

“Whoa, this is so cool!” Josh breathes in awe.

I don't hear another peep from the girls. Any time they're rendered speechless, I know for sure they're blown away.

Whatever. This kind of luxury and excess may work on the kids. But it will *not* work on me. Until—

Oh my God! Is that the house?

“We’re going to be staying there?” Reagan squeals. “It’s like a castle!”

“Castle” is a much more appropriate word. I shudder to think what this property must have cost. Whoever said “Billionaire’s Row” was back in the heart of the city clearly hasn’t seen this behemoth.

“You guys better stick close to me,” I mutter as the car comes to a stop. “I don’t want any of you getting lost in there.”

“Maybe in the evening, I can take you guys down to the stables to see the horses,” Kirill suggests.

“There are horses!” Caroline screams in delight.

I plug a finger in each eardrum, though it’s too little, too late. My ears are still ringing when I get out of the car and turn to the intimidating structure in front of me. White Corinthian columns, scowling gargoyles, doors big enough to let in half a dozen Trojan Horses side by side... this place is absurd in every way.

“Is that a garden, Uncle Kiki?” Caroline asks, pointing to a perfectly manicured circular patch of grass and crushed gravel off to the right hand side of the property.

“Nope. That’s the helipad.”

I want to vomit.

“Come on, you little gremlins. Ruslan will be waiting for us inside.” He gives me a wary look over his shoulder, but I glance away so I don’t have to meet his eyes.

I wish there was a helicopter waiting on the helipad so that we could make a quick getaway. I don’t even need to know how to fly the thing; I’ll wing it.

Or crash it.

Either one seems like a better alternative than facing Ruslan.

Reagan grabs my hand and starts towing me towards the marble staircase that leads up to the house. There must be some kind of motors powering the front doors, which is convenient, because I don’t see a spare army around to help

out if we had to open them ourselves.

We walk inside and, predictably, the interior of the house is every bit as impressive as the exterior. I stare open-mouthed at the quadruple-height ceilings and the jaw-dropping skylight hanging over the foyer, atrium, whatever the hell you call these monstrosities.

As Kirill directs us under the skylight, I notice a line of people standing off to the side. All are dressed in uniform, their eyes fastened on the opposite wall as though they're scared to look directly at us.

"This is the staff. If you need anything, feel free to ask."

Kirill then proceeds to introduce each one in turn. It's a blur of names and titles and responsibilities. A whole team of people that man the kitchen. Another group that takes care of the housekeeping chores. Gardeners, landscapers, maintenance for the plumbing and electrical and masonry and on and on. *I'm* winded by the time Kirill finishes making the introductions. He dismisses them with a wave of his hand and they file out, stone-faced and mute.

"Geez. Are they people or robots?"

He smirks. "Ruslan's grandfather was of the mindset that the help should be seen and not heard. I guess it carried over through the generations."

"Gross."

"Ruslan!"

The smile drops off my face as Ruslan approaches from an arched passageway in the corner. His smile looks forced, but then again, maybe I'm overthinking. He spends a few minutes talking to the kids, answering their questions and generally avoiding looking at me. Honestly, it's the best-case scenario.

I don't think I can pretend today.

"How about a tour of the house?" Ruslan suggests.

"That's not necessary," I interject quickly. "Kirill's already offered to show us around."

Kirill turns to me with an expression that seems to read, *Why the fuck are you putting me in the middle?*

I send him back a look that hopefully conveys what I'm thinking, which is, *You owe me!*

"Ruslan can come, too!" Caroline suggests.

Dammit. If only "seen and not heard" could be applied to the children as well as the staff.

"That's okay," Ruslan demurs smoothly. "I have work to finish. If anyone needs me, I'll be in my office."

"Probably have to take a train to get there," I mutter under my breath.

Ruslan gives each kid a smile and disappears through the same passageway he appeared from. It's impressive that he managed to do the whole welcome without ever once looking at me.

Not that I care.

It's not like I want to look at *him*, either.

We spend the next hour touring the property with Kirill. He walks us around all three floors while the kids argue over their favorite features. Reagan's particularly smitten with the spiral staircase that wraps around the glass-and-bronze elevators. For Caroline, it's the theater room that comes with its own popcorn machine for each seat. Josh goes nuts when he discovers the game room, which is equipped with a billiards table, dart board, foosball set, and half a basketball court. All three kids fall in love with the indoor pool.

As for me?

I just follow the rest of them around, feeling like an outsider. An imposter in a world that has no room or use for me.

Except for the little life I'm growing right now.

Maybe this little life is the key. Maybe this baby can save us all. It's a naïve thought, one that puts a huge burden on my unborn child.

Some mother I'm shaping up to be.

“You’ve been quiet,” Kirill says from beside me as the kids run amuck in the gardens. “You can’t avoid him forever, you know.”

“Really? ‘Cause you’ve just given us a tour of a nineteen-bedroom labyrinth that says I can.”

Kirill smirks. “Trust me. He’ll find you.”

A shiver runs down my spine; I’m just not sure what it means. My feelings are as confused as my future right now.

My new phone pings.

RUSLAN: *My office. Now.*

I hold my phone up so that Kirill can see the message. “He realizes he fired me, right? I no longer have to be at his beck and call.”

Kirill smiles sympathetically. “Some friendly advice? Go to him. It’s easier that way.”

“Pussy.”

Kirill rears back with a hand over his heart. “My goodness! The lady has the mouth of a sailor.”

“Where’s his office?”

“West wing. It’s the blue door at the end of the corridor. You’ll know it when you see it.”

“Keep an eye on the kids, okay?”

He gives me a cheeky little bow and I make my way through the mansion. This place should come with map displays at regular intervals like a shopping mall. Four wrong turns and two helpful maids later, I find myself gawking at the blue door that Kirill mentioned.

Much as I hate to admit it, Kirill’s right: I can’t avoid Ruslan forever.

Though I sure as hell wouldn’t mind trying.

Come on, Emma. Just get it over with.

I don't bother knocking. I just push the door open and find myself in an office that feels hermetically sealed off from the rest of the house. The whole space is spartan, cold, completely lacking in feeling or warmth.

It suits the man behind the desk.

"Sit."

I flinch but I keep my tone light and breezy. "What, no 'hello, Emma'? No 'how are you, Emma?'"

"I'm going to talk and you're going to listen." He pulls out a familiar stack of papers. *You have got to be kidding me.* "Recognize this?"

"Oh, you mean the bane of my existence? How could I forget."

He doesn't react to that apart from flinging our signed contract onto his table so that I can confirm that it *is* in fact the bane of my existence.

"I'm not signing anything else," I warn.

He laughs cruelly. "What would it matter even if you did? We both know you don't honor your deals."

"That is completely—"

He holds up his hand and, against all my better instincts, I find myself shutting up. *Sienna would never let herself be shut down like that.*

"You're not required to sign anything further. But what you have signed still stands. The addendum to the contract still stands."

I tense. "You mean—"

"You're pregnant." Something flashes across his eyes when he says it. "And as the contract states, you will be provided for. Congratulations, Emma. You got the security you were after."

I grip the edges of my seat and bite down on my tongue. He's making it seem like I concocted some diabolical plan to screw him over. A big, evil, mustache-twisting scheme to cheat him out of his money so that I can have a cushy life.

Doesn't he get it? This massive mansion, the surrounding grounds, all the luxury—that's not what I want. It was never what I wanted.

“Once the baby is born, you and the children will be moved to your own estate. None of you will ever want for anything ever again. But let me make one thing very clear: you are here in the capacity of a glorified surrogate. You are the baby's mother, but that is all. You will get the benefits of my lifestyle. But you will not get me.”

With only a few words, he's cut me down. I'm not a person anymore; I'm a walking womb. An incubation chamber.

I am nothing more than a means to an end.

It hurts so bad I have to bite down to keep the tears from spilling over. *No.* I will not give him the satisfaction of seeing me cry. Instead, I swallow my pain and stare back at him with an expression that I hope is as cold as the one he's giving me right now.

Two can play at this game.

“I'd rather be separated now.”

He shrugs. “As much as I would prefer that, there are too many unpredictable variables at play. The people behind Josh's kidnapping are still out there. For now, it's better for you and the children to stay close. It's the safest. You can't exactly afford to lose the baby. You'd be losing your meal ticket, too.”

I flinch back, stunned by the casual cruelty. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he truly doesn't care about me anymore.

And maybe I don't know any better.

Maybe I don't know any better at all.

“You're right,” I hiss, springing to my feet and storming towards the door before I lose the battle with my tears. “I wouldn't want that.”

RUSLAN

A baby.

My baby.

It feels surreal. And overwhelming. And completely fucking inconvenient. Was it so recently that I thought Emma was the answer to all my problems?

Despite everything that's gone down, I don't regret the pregnancy. I'm glad Emma's pregnant. And that alone is confusing as hell. I should want nothing to do with her. I should want to move her into her own separate residence immediately, just as she'd asked.

But what's the point of an excuse if you don't use it?

No matter how foolish it might be.

My mood is dark when Kirill walks in, looking as though he's spent an hour in the boxing ring. "Those girls," he whistles. "They are a handful."

"Babysitting again?"

Kirill collapses onto the leather sofa. "Someone has to."

I ignore the subtle jab. "And Emma?"

"She came back from your rendezvous with a chip on her shoulder and ushered the kids to their rooms. So I assumed she had a ball during your little chat. No one else can inspire that kind of reaction."

“Pregnant,” I spit in disgust. “How the hell did that slip past me?”

“Easy. Because you weren’t interested.”

“She should have told me herself.”

“Right, because you’re so easy to talk to,” he drawls.

“How exactly did she manage to wrap you around her little finger?”

Kirill chuckles. “She hasn’t wrapped me around anything. I simply decided to believe her.”

I get up and walk around my desk. “You spy and steal and torture people for a living, *mudak*. ‘Simply believing people’ is not in your job description.”

“I torture people who deserve it.” He shrugs nonchalantly. “She doesn’t seem like the type of person to deceive intentionally. She didn’t tell you about the baby because she didn’t think she could. And she’d have been right.”

Is there anyone left on my side? I think irritably to myself.

“How do you know that?”

“Because *I* tried to tell you about the baby and you refused to listen.”

I drop down opposite him. “Say that again.”

“Remember the medical file I stole right after Emma checked into the hospital? It was all there in black and white. Sonogram and all. I knew she was pregnant and I tried to tell you, but you wouldn’t let me get a word in edgewise.”

Fuck.

“So what? You tried to tell; I didn’t listen. So you were prepared to let her take my child and run from me?”

He rolls his eyes. “Don’t flatter yourself. She wasn’t running from you.”

I tense up. “Who else could she have been running from?”

“Ben.”

Somehow, I wasn't expecting that. "Ben?"

"Who do you think gave her all those injuries?" Kirill asks with a skeptical eyebrow.

"That was *Ben*?"

"Well, she didn't just trip."

I remember walking into the apartment and seeing the broken coffee table. Fuckler had pushed her right through the glass. No wonder she'd been cut up all over.

Fucking bastard. My hands tighten into fists on my lap.

"He's gonna pay for that."

"I thought you didn't care about Emma." Kirill makes a big show of tapping his lip like he's deep in thought. "Why ever would you want to avenge a woman you claim you have no feelings for?"

Thankfully, I have my answer locked and loaded. "Because she's carrying my child," I snap.

"Right. What a satisfying, wholesome, extremely believable explanation."

I don't like that look on his face. It's entirely too smug for my liking.

He sighs and continues, "I've already spoken to Judge Altemeyer. He'll be able to resolve the custody order soon enough. Convert Emma's temporary custody into permanent custody."

"Good. Keep me in the loop." I walk back to my desk and glare down at the massive stack of resumes piled on top of it. "Now, I have to get back to work."

"That's it?" Kirill asks, setting his feet back on the ground.

"What do you mean?"

"You're not going to talk to Emma?"

"I already did." I rake a hand through my hair and exhale at the memory of

that frustrating exchange. “I told her where we stand. I explained how the addendum will work going forward. There’s nothing else to discuss.”

Kirill looks disappointed in me. “Is this really the kind of environment you want your kid growing up in, Ruslan?”

“What are you looking for us to be, Kirill? One big, happy family? Emma shot that future to hell when she started running her mouth to Remmy Jefferson.” He starts to talk but I hold my hand up to shut him up. “Before you defend her, let me remind you that *she*’s the reason the contract is out there in the ether, being leveraged for personal gain by that slimy little shit. I trusted her once and look where that got me.”

“It got you a child? A family? The chance to carry on the family name? Which one of those is supposed to be the bad thing?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Get out.”

He sighs and raises his hands in self-defense. “I’m going. Anything else you need before I do?”

I pick up half the stack of papers on my desk and offer them to him. “Go through these resumes and narrow it down for me. I have to hire someone by the end of the week. Work’s piling up as we speak.”

“You know, Emma has experience with—”

“Get out.”

Giggling like a schoolgirl, he walks the resumes out of my office. I hadn’t counted on Kirill doing a full one-eighty on me. He is the one person who always has my back. I have no doubt he still does—in the important ways, at least—but I can sense that he’s questioning my choices.

Yeah? Well, screw him. I know better.

And it’s better that I keep my distance from Emma Carson.

Things got out of hand there for a minute. I let my desire for her cloud my better judgment. But now, I’m thinking clearly again. And this time, I refuse to give in. Baby or not, she isn’t getting any part of me. Not my dick or my heart or anything in between.

I've seen what happens when you give your heart to someone and they have the gall to die and take it to the grave with them.

I don't intend to repeat my father's mistakes.

RUSLAN

A new contender for “bane of my existence” has taken the lead.

Temps.

I’ve had two already and both were complete failures. The first burst into tears when I asked her to redo my schedule for the fourth time and the second asked if she could have Thursdays and Fridays off because she reached maximum efficiency on a three-day work week.

Suffice it to say, each had lasted only a handful of hours. I’m currently on my third attempt and I’m already imagining all the different ways I could murder her and make it look like an accident.

“Mr. Ruslan?” she chirps, careening into my office for what feels like the dozenth time in the last hour. “Do you need anything? I’m just heading into the lunchroom to grab some granola.”

I glare at her but somehow, she doesn’t get the message. Lack of brain cells will do that.

“No.”

“Are you sure? The granola here is *amazing*. So many flavors, too! The chocolate peanut butter is my fav—”

“Melissa,” I growl, “you need to stop talking. Now.”

“Are you in a meeting?”

My laptop is closed. My phone is sitting a foot away from me and there's no one else in the room. How can she possibly think I'm in a meeting now?

"Stop talking and walk away."

She just smiles serenely. "In my experience, men are always extra crabby on an empty stomach. I'll bring you back some granola. It'll help that mood of yours."

Now, she's talking to me like I'm a child.

I really did have it good with Emma. Problem is, I wanted to fuck her, too. If only I could turn back time and—

No. No, I'd still want to fuck her.

The door isn't shut ten seconds before my witless new assistant bursts in again. "Oh, and your friend is here to see you. He said his name was Alan Something-or-other. I'll just send him right in."

"What? No. *Melissa!*"

Too late. She holds open the door—and Adrik fucking Makarov waltzes in with a bottle of scotch wrapped in a red velvet ribbon.

"Why thank you, darling," he croons to her.

"Of course!" She bats her eyelashes at Adrik and sashays off to eat her weight in granola. I regret hiring her. I'd rather have the granola for an assistant.

"New help?" Adrik asks as he places the scotch on my table and makes himself comfortable.

"Not for long."

He wrinkles up his nose. "Don't tell me she's a temp? What happened to your pretty little assistant? What was her name again... ah that's right, Emma!"

Yeah, like he fucking forgot.

"She was quite the looker. Perky little ass. And her tits weren't bad, either."

My hand clenches into a fist but I force it under the table. I'm almost positive Adrik is behind all the shady shit that's gone down recently but without proof, I can't pin it on him. I need to play the long game until I get enough information to make my move.

The fact that he's come up clean so far is grating on my nerves. It only reinforces my theory that there's someone on the inside helping him.

Emma...?

No. Impossible. She wouldn't—

Then again, she *had* betrayed me to Remmy. And who can forget that intimate dance she had shared with Adrik the night of the Olsen-Ferber gala?

There's no way. She doesn't have enough information herself to be able to pass anything actionable along to Adrik. Her knowledge of Venera was zilch until the night of the launch.

Focus.

“What do you want, Adrik?”

He smiles, the very picture of pleasantry. “Just wanted to express my sympathies in person and give you a little ‘*I’m sorry it didn’t work out*’ gift.”

I suppress the urge to grab his bottle of scotch and fling it at his head. “As usual, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, come on. When will you stop acting coy and just admit that you’re behind Venera?”

“I’m not.”

Adrik rolls his eyes. “Okay, okay. Wink-wink. Nudge-nudge. Am I right?”

“Fucking hell. You and Melissa will get along great.”

He crosses one leg over the other and laughs. “I can’t fault your mood. I’d be equally pissed if the drug I spent millions to develop ended up being a colossal failure before it’s even launched. Dead on arrival. I heard that no one is touching the samples anymore. Gives new meaning to the term ‘kiss of death,’ am I right?”

I lean back in my seat. “Is this what you call sympathizing?”

“I’m not here *only* to sympathize—”

“Of course not.”

“I also wanted to thank you.” He hesitates—for dramatic effect, no doubt. Maybe he’s just waiting for me to ask why he’s thanking me. Joke’s on him.

I don’t fucking care.

He clears his throat, irritated by my complete lack of interest. “I’m here to thank you for inspiring me. I’ve decided to launch my *own* drug. Of course, mine will actually work.”

Motherfucker.

It’s not like an illicit street drug can be patented. I’ll have no way of stopping this if he decides to roll out his own brand.

“Let me guess?” I say, pretending to be bored. “Venera 2.0.”

He laughs, clearly high on his premature victory. “It’s called Sopernik.”

Sopernik. It means “rival” in Russian. A little on the nose, but then again, I’d expect nothing less from Adrik. The fucker is grinning from ear to ear. It would be so damn easy to shatter that smile with a bullet. Then I’d have Melissa come in and clean the mess. That should make for a speedy resignation letter.

Two birds. One stone.

“It’s a mild aphrodisiac that lowers your inhibitions. I’ve tried it myself and it’s fucking brilliant. Makes you feel floaty and horny all at the same time. It’s sure to be a hit.”

“What do you mean, ‘you’ve already tried it’? You’ve already got samples up?”

He licks his lips. “It would have taken years of development, but I was fortunate enough to stumble across this genius team who had experience developing party drugs. So I paid them handsomely and put them to work in my personal labs.” Adrik’s smile is starting to look unbalanced. “Ironic, isn’t

it? Just when you lose your chemist, I find a whole team of them!”

“‘Ironic’ is not the word I would use.”

“Oh, come now, my friend. You can be happy for me. It’s not every day you stumble across a windfall like this.”

Unless, of course, you’ve worked to steal someone else’s.

“Word of advice, *friend*,” I growl, leaning over my desk to fix him with a furious stare. “Watch your back. Success breeds envy and envy breeds action. You should know that better than anyone.”

He blinks at me innocently. “Such wise words. I’ll be glad to share some of my wisdom with you once I’ve launched Sopernik successfully.” He gets to his feet and throws me a casual wink. “And say hello to Emma for me, will you? Tell her I think about our dance often.”

He walks out while I imagine the day I can finally do away with the pretense...

And slaughter the *mudak* once and for all.

EMMA

“A trampoline!” Reagan squeals.

She takes off at a run and Josh and Caroline zoom off behind her. I throw Kirill a side glance. “Who says money can’t buy love, huh?”

Kirill chuckles. “That’s not what he’s doing.”

“Oh, no? Yesterday, it was a bounce castle on the lawn. This morning, it was a zipline through the trees. Now, this? If he’s not trying to buy their love, then he’s trying to overcompensate.”

“For what?”

“For not being around.”

“They’re not his kids. He doesn’t *have* to be around.”

Kirill is right. But it still pisses me off. I skewer him with a glare, then turn and start stomping back towards the house.

I hear his footsteps come up behind me. “Whoa, Emma. Hold up. I’m sorry. That didn’t come out the way I meant it.”

I clench my teeth, but I let him draw me to a stop. “It’s accurate, though. He isn’t their father. They shouldn’t be caught in the middle of all this misery.”

Kirill exhales and looks over at the kids. They’re all trying to do back flips on the huge trampoline and laughing hysterically, even Josh. “Yeah, they look

utterly miserable.”

“Whatever. You’re his man. Of course you’re gonna see his side and only his side.”

“That’s not fair. He’s my priority, sure. But that doesn’t mean you and I can’t be friends.”

I frown. “Is this you overcompensating for the fact that I’m not allowed to talk to my only friend?”

“We just want to be safe here, Emma.” Kirill rubs his chin and sighs. I’m sure he’s as sick of giving this explanation as I am of hearing it. “The more information Phoebe has about you, the more of a target she becomes.”

“Right. Spare me the lecture. Bottom line is, I’m completely isolated with no one to talk to.”

“You can talk to me.”

“So you can go give Ruslan a full report? C’mon. I’m not stupid, Kirill.”

“You two belong together,” he mumbles. “You’re as paranoid as he is.”

“Does he think I’m up to no good?” I demand. “Spying for someone else now, I suppose. Probably the government. Or Mossad. Maybe some rival Bratva don?”

“*Pahkan.*”

“Whatever.”

He smirks. “I’m not reporting on you to Ruslan.”

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t believe you.” I immediately regret my snark. I can’t exactly afford to alienate Kirill. Not when I have so few people to talk to here. Not when he’s the one helping me get custody of the kids. “I’m sorry... I’m being a bitch. It’s the hormones.”

“Yeah, you better milk that excuse while you can.”

I can’t quite suppress my smile. “Do you know what’s going on with Ben, by the way?”

The laughter vanishes from Kirill's face. He's all fun and games at first glance, but beneath that is a stone-cold killer who doesn't like Ben any more than the rest of us do. "He's lying low for the moment. I don't think he understands why or how he's being snowballed. All the momentum he gained with that CNN interview fizzled out overnight."

Take that, you bastard.

"He's hit the bottle pretty hard," he adds.

"Predictable," I snort. It must be nice to have a coping mechanism available for the price of a six-pack at the corner store.

"But," adds Kirill, "your parents are another story entirely."

My eyes snap to his. "My parents?"

"Your old phone has a ton of messages and missed calls from a Barrett Carson and a Beatrice Carson. I'm an espionage genius, so I put two and two together."

I groan. "Oh, God. I need to deal with that."

"I'm inclined to agree. Just convince them that you have the situation under control. Don't mention anything about Ruslan or Remmy or... anything else."

"Duh. Even if there wasn't a legitimate reason, I'd still be hiding shit from my parents."

He leans against a wall and folds his arms as he regards me with a sympathetic look. "So I take it you're not particularly close with them?"

"Sienna was my family. Barrett and Beatrice were basically just our rich patrons. And when they didn't get what they wanted from us, they cut us off. Financially, that is. They thought it would have a much bigger impact than it did."

"Losing their money didn't scare you?"

"It did," I say with a shrug. "For about five minutes. But we both had jobs and an actual work ethic. Neither one of us was scared to make our own way."

And we had each other. That helped.”

His eyes never leave my face. “It must be hard losing a sibling.”

“It’s the hardest.” The way he asks the question makes me curious. “Have you lost a sibling?”

“No, but Ruslan has. I saw how hard that was for him.”

“You were there for that, huh?” He shrugs and looks away. Something tells me he regrets bringing it up in the first place. “Did you know Leonid?”

“Not very well. Ruslan and I only really became friends after... it happened.”

I’m dying to ask more, to know more. But he’s shutting down on me already. “Kirill—”

“You should give your parents a call. We don’t need them stirring the pot,” he says abruptly.

I scowl. “Seriously? I can’t talk to Phoebe, but *this* is allowed?”

He smiles like it’s just another day. “This is work. Damage control.”

“You’re really annoying, y’know that?” I stick my tongue out at him.

“Oh, *real* mature.”

“It’s the hormones,” I say prettily.

Laughing, he heads off towards the right and I go into the main living room to get the dreaded phone call done with it.

“Hi, Mom,” I greet without enthusiasm when she picks up.

“Emma? Emma?”

Obviously, yes! Who else calls her “Mom” anymore?

“Yeah, it’s me,” I say, weary already. “It’s Emma.”

“Emma Lorraine Carson. For God’s sake! What the bloody hell is wrong with you?”

Not exactly what I was expecting. But also, not not what I was expecting,

either.

“You want the short list or the long one?”

“Don’t make jokes. Not now!”

“When then?”

She ignores that. “Your father and I have been worried sick. Ben has been worried sick. For you to take those children like you did... He’s their *father!*”

She’s shrieking so loud that she’s hurting my ear. I do a quick check to determine no one’s around—no need to subject myself to shame on multiple fronts—and then I put her on speakerphone.

“Are you even interested in why I took the children?”

“There is no excuse. Absolutely none. We covered for you with the media, but I *knew*. I knew the moment Ben called us, absolutely frantic over his children—”

“Oh, please, don’t tell me you two actually fell for that dog and pony show.”

“Emma Lorr—”

“Stop using my full name like I’m a daughter you have the right to scold,” I interrupt coldly. “You were never a parent when I needed one. There’s no point in starting now.”

There’s a beat of silence on the line.

“What has gotten into you lately?”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“I mean that you’ve been even more dismissive, abrasive, rude, and detached than you usually are.”

I can practically hear Sienna hissing in my ear. *This bitch...*

“That’s rich, coming from you. You’re the queen of detachment parenting. In fact, you should write a book. *Ignoring Your Children for the First Eighteen Years of Their Lives and Criticizing Them for the Rest of It: A How-to*

Manual by Beatrice Carson. Foreword by Satan.”

“I’m not going to listen to this garbage,” she sniffs. “Not when you are the one who’s committed the crime. Those children should be with their father.”

“Interesting. Because, not so long ago, you made me an offer to leave the children in your custody. You didn’t think they needed their father then.”

“We were just trying to do what was best for those kids—”

“And I’m not?”

“No!” I actually flinch away from the phone at the volume of her shriek. “It doesn’t seem like you care about those children at all. Every decision you’ve made has come from a place of pride and selfishness. Honestly, Sienna is probably rolling in her grave. Her children couldn’t possibly be with a worse guardian.”

I suck in a breath. Some words hurt worse than others, even when you wrote off the person speaking them years ago. I don’t care what my mother thinks about me or anything else. I haven’t for a very long time. And yet, suddenly, I’m the same seven-year-old girl who stood in front of my mother, offering up the canvas I’d spent hours on, only to be told that I “didn’t have the talent for painting.”

I open my mouth to defend myself but nothing comes out. I can’t even think of what to say. The only thing running through my head is...

What if she’s right?

“Those children deserve better than the life you’ve given them,” my mother seethes. “With you, they can only ever have a mediocre life. That made sense for you—after all, mediocre life for a mediocre person.”

I bite down on my bottom lip, my limbs frozen in place. With one click, I can silence her for good. But the masochist in me refuses to follow through.

“At least Sienna’s not around to see the shambles you have made of her children’s lives. At least...”

I notice movement from the corner of my eye. Gasping, I jerk around, hoping it’s not one of the kids. It’s not.

It's Ruslan.

He's standing under one arched passageway, his eyes fixed on me. *Oh God—he heard. He heard everything.*

His glare is harsh, but I have no idea what he's thinking. And then he makes it clear what he's thinking when he walks down the passage and disappears around the corner.

He doesn't care. This is not his business anymore.

Message received, loud and clear.

My mother is still hurling more verbal abuse at me. And I just sit there and take it, shaking with silent tears. Because I no longer have the fight left in me to do anything else...

And deep down, I'm terrified that everything she's accusing me of is true.

RUSLAN

I'm patrolling the halls in the East Wing. It's not even remotely in my job description and yet here I am, walking quietly down corridors that now belong to Emma and the kids.

I can smell her on the carpets and the walls. That faint citrus smell that haunts the air.

Shoes lie haphazardly on all sides of the broad passageway and wayward toys are scattered like breadcrumbs leading to the playroom. A piece of paper hangs off my textured Venetian walls, secured there with... what the fuck is that?

Chewing gum?

Oh, *hell* fucking no.

I tear the paper free of the wall and then spend the next few minutes trying to scrape off the blue gunk that was holding it there. When it's as good as I can get it, I glance down at the canvas. From the colorful scribblings, I'd wager this is Reagan's handywork. She's all about rainbows and unicorns these days. A typical five-year-old. In a very atypical setting.

Forget the handwoven Persian rug that lines the passageway; forget the bold Tuscan paintings on the walls—*this* is a work of art.

I fold the picture up carefully and slip it into my pocket for safekeeping. Then I continue down the hall, trying to remember all the other scents I'd been

partial to before my senses were invaded with notes of endless citrus.

I'm deep in my own thoughts when I hear something.

Screaming.

“Aaaarghhh. No. No. Please.... Ahh!”

Panic surges through my body. That scream is immediately recognizable.

Josh.

And then I'm running. I'm running faster than I've ever run in my life.

Whoever breached through all the layers of security I've wrapped around this estate is gonna get a gold medal for doing the impossible and getting inside.

Right before I tear him apart—limb from goddamn limb.

I burst into the boy's room with my fists at the ready. But all I see is a frightened child writhing around in his bed.

It's not an invader.

It's a nightmare.

He's still thrashing in place when I approach his bed, his face scrunched up with anxiety. He's sweating right through the bedding. I put my hand on arm and give him a firm shake. He gasps, jerking upright, his arms flailing in every direction.

“It's okay. It's just me. Ruslan.”

He pushes against my hold for a couple of seconds, still struggling in the thicket of his nightmare. I have to keep repeating myself before his eyes finally blink away the sleep and focus on me.

“R-Ruslan?” His voice is cracked with fear but there's relief muddled in there, too. “S-sorry,” is the second thing out of his mouth.

“Why are you apologizing?”

He wraps his arms around himself. “I-I didn't mean to disturb anyone. I usually don't.”

I frown. “Josh, how often do you have these nightmares?”

The whites of his eyes are prominent in the gloom. “Most nights,” he admits, dropping his face down low.

Why didn’t Emma tell me about this? I’m so pissed off that the veins in my forearms bulge in protest. A part of me is aware that my anger is irrational. Kinda like it was two days ago when I overheard Emma’s conversation with her mother.

I stood in the archway, eavesdropping unrepentantly as her mother tore into her about being a bad guardian and not putting the children first. At first, she fought back. But then, the more her mother yelled, the more Emma basically shut down. It was like she believed all the vile things her bitch of a mother was spouting. It was like she felt she *had* to sit there and take it.

Then there was the moment Emma turned and noticed me standing there. I wanted to fucking roar at her: *Why aren’t you fighting back? Why aren’t you defending yourself? Don’t you see how wrong she is?*

But that look in her eyes—that hopeless, lost look—was too much to take. It was in danger of pulling me back in and I couldn’t let that happen. Not again.

I’m done being her savior. Or as Reagan liked to say, *her knight in silver armor*. She’s already in my home, taking up space, breathing my air. That has to be enough.

Hell, even that feels like too much.

“Do you wanna talk about it?” I ask the boy. He shakes his head, his eyes softening. I dab his sweaty brow with the back of my hand. “Your aunt didn’t tell me you were having these nightmares.”

His eyes go wide. “No, Ruslan! You can’t tell her. She doesn’t know.”

So she doesn’t know. Somehow, that doesn’t make me any less angry with her.

“Please,” he continues. “Please. You can’t tell her.”

His panic seems as irrational as my anger. “Josh, I think she should—

“No!” he insists adamantly. “No, I don’t want her to know. It’ll only make her more sad and she’s already sad enough lately.” That gives me pause. Josh plows onward, clearly worried that he hasn’t convinced me enough. “She’ll only worry about me and I don’t want her to worry.”

“She’s the parent, Josh. You’re the child. You’re not supposed to be the one protecting her.”

His forehead scrunches up. He looks less like a child now. I see the lines of the man he’ll become already sketched in his face. “You don’t get it. You weren’t there.”

“Josh—”

“Everyone always leaves us!” he interrupts. “Mom died and Dad... Dad doesn’t care about any of us. Aunt Emma didn’t have to l-look after us but she did. Dad was supposed to s-send us to school and buy us new shoes and books but Aunt Emma is the one who did that. Dad was supposed to make our dinners and put us to bed and, for a while, he did. But when he stopped, Aunt Emma did that, too. She’s always d-doing things for us. Even though she doesn’t have t-to. Even when she was w-w-working really late, she would figure out ways to do things for us. Like l-leave us little notes in our lunchboxes. Or pick us up from school early and take us to the p-park.”

The stammer is new. No guesses needed for why it’s popping up now. But as I listen to his speech, I can’t help but marvel at how much this eight-year-old has observed. He’s noticed every sacrifice Emma has made along the way. The work that’s supposed to be invisible to children.

She didn’t have to do any of it. She had the option of being the weekend aunt. The one who popped her head in once a week with presents and kind words. She had parents who were more than willing to take on all three children.

But she decided that they weren’t good enough to raise Josh and his sisters. And, based on that phone call alone, she was very fucking right.

“Please, Ruslan?” Josh begs. “Don’t tell Aunt Em.”

I grimace. “Okay. But that means you and I are gonna have to work on a solution together. We can get some night lamps installed in here.”

Josh chews on his bottom lip. “I don’t think that’ll help.”

“What do you think will help then?”

His eyes flicker to mine. “Boxing? We haven’t really done any more lessons since the... the k-k-kidnapping. I think I wanna start again.”

He’s not laying blame at my feet and yet I feel so guilty. I’ve been so distracted by my anger lately that I let his boxing lessons fall to the wayside. It’s just another example of the people in his life leaving him. The fact that Emma is the only constant, the only one who’s stayed through it all, makes me feel deeply ashamed of my own choices since I found out about what she’d done.

“I’m sorry, Josh. I shouldn’t have stopped our lessons. Of course we can continue them, if that’s what you want.”

He nods emphatically. “I want to be able to defend m-m-myself.” His cheeks redden as he fights his new obstacle. “I d-d-don’t want to be s-s-scared all the time.”

I nod, refusing to address it unless Josh does. “We’ll start tomorrow. Early morning.”

“What about Aunt E-Emma?”

“We don’t need to tell Aunt Emma,” I assure him. “This can be our little secret.”

He gives me a small, grateful smile and some of the tension eases out of his jaw. “Thank you.”

That soft little voice catches in my chest. It stays there. “Why don’t you try sleeping now, Josh?”

He lies back down but his eyes are still wide and alert. “Ruslan?”

“Yes.”

“Can you stay with me... until I fall asleep?”

And that’s how I end up curled on the side of Josh’s bed, watching the boy’s eyes flutter shut. It fills me with this vague sense of purpose. But there’s fear,

too.

Is this the rest of my life?

No. After the baby is born, Emma and the kids will be moved to their own estate. I won't be tasked with being the nightmare watchman. I won't be watching them go to sleep every night.

Soon, they'll be gone for good. That should give me some relief.

But it doesn't.

EMMA

I shouldn't be telling him about the appointment. It's none of his business. And I don't even want him there.

So then explain to me why I am currently ambling along through the confusing mess of pathways and rooms in search of Ruslan so that I can inform him of my next doctor's visit.

Just trying to save myself some drama down the line. That's all this is. I don't want an excuse to see him. I'm simply being mature here.

It has absolutely *nothing* to do with the hot-as-sin dream I had about Ruslan last night. It involved a hot oil massage, followed by very intense foreplay. I woke up in the gray of the pre-dawn having soaked through my panties.

I ask one of the maids I run into if she's seen Ruslan anywhere and she points me in the direction of the gym. It took me a couple of days to figure out that Kirill's house tour when we first arrived had excluded the west wing—which just so happens to be Ruslan's side of the house.

I take a petty pride in stepping right over that imaginary line in the sand.

The color palette shifts as I venture from our wing to his. It hardens, neutralizes. Less blue and green, more tan and gray. I come up to the gym and it takes some pushing to get the door open.

If I were someone who was remotely interested in gyms, I might have been impressed. As it stands, the space doesn't do much for me.

The man on the other end of the gym however... *hot damn.*

He's wearing a pair of black nylon shorts and nothing else. He's got boxing gloves on and he's railing hard on a punching bag suspended from the ceiling by a thick metal chain. With every powerful punch, the chain groans, the bag swings and his back muscles ripple with power.

I wouldn't mind being that punching bag if it means getting pounded like that.

I cringe at myself. Seriously. These hormones are out of control. It's one thing to be ogling him in my dreams; it's an entirely different thing to be objectifying him in real life.

I never thought I'd actually prefer the morning sickness phase. No shame in that game. *This* phase however... It's like an itch that I can't scratch. I tried scratching it myself last night after I woke up from that very vivid dream but, even after I'd gotten off, I was left feeling hollow and dissatisfied.

The solution is obvious—I need an actual penis. Preferably one that is attached to a hot-blooded man. *This* hot-blooded man, to be specific. But since that isn't gonna be happening anytime soon, I'm gonna have to make do with a silicone substitute if I can get my hands on one.

Hm, how inappropriate would it be to put that on my food cravings list for Kirill?

Yeah. Very.

I'll have to figure out a way to order some special toys for myself without either Kirill or Ruslan finding out. Until then, I'll just have to satisfy myself with the eye candy on display right now.

“Whatcha looking at?”

I clap my hands over my mouth to stifle a scream as I whirl around to find Kirill at my side.

He smirks. “Enjoying the view, are we?”

I glower at him. “Don't be ridiculous. I was just... I wasn't looking at... I just came to... *Shut up.*”

He pretends to back out of the room slowly. “Is there something I can help you with or do you wanna just ogle Ruslan some more?”

“I was *not*. And also—*shh!*” His face is going red from the need to laugh. “Seriously, Kirill. Stop drawing attention. He’s gonna turn around and—oh, fuck, he’s coming—will you stop giggling?”

Ruslan stalks towards us, eyes narrowing. There are only two looks he gives me these days: suspicion and irritation. Today’s glare is a fun little blend of the two. I don’t mind, though—I’m a little distracted by the eight-pack abs staring me in the face.

“He doesn’t own a shirt?” I say under my breath.

“Kirill. Find out what she wants.” Ruslan’s whip-sharp voice carries across the gym.

Kirill turns to me. “I assume you’re here for a reason. Unless that reason is to be bent over the bench press?”

“Asshole,” I mutter. “I’m just checking to see if King Douche Bag is interested in coming to my doctor’s appointment this evening.”

“I will go and see.” Kirill saunters off, leaving me standing at the doorway with the vast no-man’s-land of gym equipment between us.

It’s a sad state of affairs when you need a go-between to speak to your baby daddy. From here, I can’t decipher Ruslan’s expression. The slight furrow between his brows persists through his entire conversation with Kirill. It lasts longer than I expect to. At one point, I wonder if they’re arguing, but when Kirill walks back over to me, he seems as good-natured as ever.

“He’ll be there.”

“Oh. Okay.” I sneak a glance past Kirill’s shoulder. Ruslan has moved on to the bench press and suddenly, Kirill’s cheeky suggestion from earlier doesn’t sound quite so bad.

Escape, girl, begs my inner wise woman’s voice. *Get your horny ass away from the potential scene of the crime.*

But those muscles hold me captive for a moment. He’s absolutely

manhandling that barbell. Maybe I should offer myself up instead...?

Abort. Flee. Run for your life.

Kirill passes me a towel from a nearby shelf. “Here you go.”

“What is this for?” I ask as I take it.

“For the drool running down the side of your mouth.”

I fling the towel at his face and get the hell out of the gym before I embarrass myself further. I need to get on that special order of mine.

And fast.



“Is this your first?”

I blink up at the doctor. I haven’t been paying a whole lot of attention to this appointment so far. Mostly because of the surly shadow in the far corner of the room. I’m not sure why he decided to be here at all, because he’s spent most of the appointment on his phone. Apart from greeting the doctor with a curt nod, he hasn’t looked up once.

Never thought I’d be jealous of a screen.

“Sorry?”

When Dr. Owens smiles, his warm brown eyes wrinkle at the edges. He looks like he really means that smile.

“I asked if this is your first baby.”

“Yes. I mean, uh, no.” Dr. Owens frowns in Ruslan’s direction as though my distraction is his fault. Which it is, so the good doctor is right on the money there. “Well, technically, it’s my first baby. But I’ve got three other kids that I inherited from my sister.”

“Wow. Full house then.”

I try to concentrate on the doctor and ignore the fact that Ruslan just accepted

a call. Right in the middle of my appointment. He doesn't even bother to leave the room—just moves further into the corner and turns his back on both of us.

“I have five girls myself.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Oh, wow.”

“The youngest is seventeen. She's leaving for Columbia next fall. Honestly, it's making my wife and I wish we had more. You probably hear this a lot, but enjoy this time. It goes by fast.”

Smiling, I wonder how different my life would have been if Cedric Owens, MD, had been my father. He looks like the kind of man who wouldn't care about your grade point average just as long as you were happy. Who'd brag about you just because you're his kid, not because you'd done anything special. Who hates the idea of you leaving the nest, not because he's losing control, but simply because he'll *miss* you.

I wouldn't know anything about a man like that.

He turns back to the monitor. “Well, back to business. It looks like everything is progressing beautifully. The baby is strong and healthy.”

My gaze flickers to Ruslan, wondering if he heard that. He's still looking down at his phone.

“Emma, dear.” Dr. Owens pulls me back with a gentle pat on my arm. “Look at the screen. There's your baby.”

I try to breathe through my budding tears. Half of them are for the beautiful little blob on the screen right now. The other half is for the man sitting as far away from me as he possibly can. At least he's actually looking at the screen now.

“The baby's healthy?” Ruslan asks Dr. Owens in a bored rumble.

“Yes. You have nothing to worry about.”

“Good. Then I'm no longer needed here.” I sit up a little straighter. He's my ride—where the hell does he think he's going? Ruslan throws me only a cursory glance. “Once you finish up the appointment, Boris will be waiting

outside to drive you back to the estate.”

He's not even gonna drive me back?

Before I can find my voice and ask, he stalks out of the room. But even when he's gone, his bad vibes linger. I collapse back against the examination chair and try to squeeze my tears back into their ducts.

“Emma, sweetheart, are you okay?”

I force a smile onto my face. “A-okay, Doc.”

Only, of course I'm not. How can I be, when the man I'm gonna have a baby with thinks the absolute worst of me? I've tried not to care but that's proving to be the challenge of my life. Every day, I wake up and try not to care, and every day, I lose.

“Can I have a couple of copies of the sonogram please?”

“Of course. I'll get that printed for you straightaway.”

Phoebe's gonna want a copy. And who knows? Maybe Ruslan will decide he wants one, too. I'll keep extras on hand just in case he decides that being a father is more important than punishing me.

But I'm not gonna hold my breath.

RUSLAN

“Yes!” I roar. “That’s the way to do it!”

I’ve been training the kid again for two weeks now and he’s picked up right where we left off. His right hook is really coming along. It kindles an old excitement, the same exhilarated sense of accomplishment that I felt in my early boxing days when I was still learning.

Back when Leonid was my teacher.

Every now and then during our training sessions, I hear my brother’s voice in my head and his words come out of my mouth.

I was the second son; I knew I would never be as important to the Bratva as him, but it didn’t matter. I just wanted to be important to *him*.

And I knew I was, every time he took time out of his own training to come and spend a few hours in the gym with me. I adopted his boxing style. I copied his fighting techniques. I trained just as religiously as he did.

It wasn’t about competing with him.

It was about making him proud.

I thought I had to earn it. It’s not until this moment, with Josh, that I realize how pointless my attempts were. I never had to try to earn Leonid’s love. He would have been proud of me either way.

“Good man. Let’s take a break now.”

Josh lowers his fists reluctantly. “I can go another round.”

I can’t help grinning. The kid’s got both heart and determination. I pat his shoulder and gesture for him to take a seat on the benches. “You need to rest your body, too. No point overexerting yourself. Drink some water.”

I toss him a bottle and grab one myself. I’ve had a few thoughts percolating in my head these past few days. The more time I spend with Josh, the more impressed I am by him. He doesn’t just have the makings of a leader; he’s got the heart of a fighter, too. He may not have been born Bratva, but this child is Bratva through and through.

Training him with that in mind might not be the worst thing to do.

Of course, Emma would freak out. But I’m okay with that. Anything to make her pay. And I *have* been doing my best on that front.

It’s a subtle kind of vengeance, though I’ve found in my life that subtlety is often overrated. I keep my distance from her more often than not and I make sure, when we do spend time together, that I don’t do anything to disturb the kids.

It’s when we are alone together that the gloves come off.

I make sure she knows just how pissed I am to be forced into a corner with her. I stare at my screen. I glower and snarl and keep my words to a growled minimum.

I’m waiting for the day when I stop having to force myself to do all those things.

Because the truth is that I stare at my phone to avoid staring at her. I glower and growl because if I let her in even an inch, I’m going to lose the battle with myself. I’m going to take her back into my bed, my heart, my life, and if I do that, I risk going through what my father went through.

It doesn’t help that she barely reacts to me anymore. She keeps her own feelings bottled up tight and out of reach. Even when I’m cruel to her, she doesn’t react apart from a half-flinch or a fraction of a frown. Maybe she *doesn’t* actually care. Maybe she’s pretending, just like I am.

Either way, I find myself wanting to grab her and shake her. *Wake up*, I want to yell. *Fight back*.

“Ruslan?” Josh asks, breaking through my tangled thoughts. “When are we going back to school?”

I cringe. Emma brought up this same topic a few days back after the kids had been out of school for the third week in a row.

I concentrate on Josh. “Soon. There’s just one catch: you’re not going back to the same school.”

Josh does a double-take. “Really?”

“Yeah. Does that sound okay to you?”

“Yeah. I never really liked the school we were in.” He shrugs when he sees me arch a questioning brow. “I didn’t wanna say anything because I didn’t wanna make Aunt Em feel bad about it.”

This kid... I don’t know what the hell is wrong with his father. If I had a son like this, I’d scream it from the fucking rooftops.

“Well, I’m here now. You don’t have to worry about things like money anymore. I’ll take care of you and your sisters.”

“Aunt Em, too?” he asks tentatively.

“Of course,” I say in as neutral a voice as possible. I have to dig my nails into my palm to keep from grimacing.

“Why do we need to change schools, though?”

“I need to make sure you and your sisters are protected. This place I’ve chosen for you is safe.”

“So... no one will be able to get to us? Even Dad?”

“Not even your father,” I assure him.

Josh sighs. “Okay then.”

I knew Josh hated his father but this is the first time that I’ve detected a hint

of fear. “Is there something you wanna tell me about your dad?”

“No.”

His answer comes a little too fast for my liking. “Josh. You can tell me anything.”

“I...” His cheeks flush with color and even his ears go red. “I... I feel bad.”

“About what?”

He sneaks a quick glance at me and his ears only get redder. “I don’t want you to hate me.”

I place a huge hand on his shoulder. “Listen carefully. There is absolutely nothing that would ever make me hate you. Trust me on that.”

Josh gulps. Then he fixes his gaze on the black leather heavy bag in the corner and starts talking. “He used to make me steal from Aunt Emma. Take money out of her purse ‘n’ stuff. When I refused, he would... Sometimes, he would h-hit m-me.” He swallows again, his eyes shifting around the gym as though they don’t know where to land.

And as for me? I’m talking myself calm. *Breathe. Sit.* Because if I don’t win that internal battle, I’m gonna storm out of here, track down that useless fuck, and beat him until he’s nothing but a bloodstain beneath my shoe.

This isn’t the moment for that, though.

This is a moment for the boy.

“After a while, I stopped helping him, even when he hit me or pushed me around. But then he said he would do things to Rae and Caro.”

My vision goes red.

“I hated doing it,” he continues. “I hated stealing from Aunt Emma. She worked so hard and she trusted me. B-but... I—”

“You were trying to protect your sisters,” I help him out. “There’s no shame in that, Josh. You have nothing to feel bad about. Not a goddamn thing, do you understand?”

“But... I did a bad thing. So many times.”

“No—you did what you had to do to survive.” *Maybe Emma did, too.* I push that thought away and focus on the tremulous eight-year-old. “Thanks for trusting me with this, kid. That takes courage.”

He gives me a shy smile. “Thanks for training me. I know that you’re busy. And that you’re important. It means a lot that you... that you want to spend time with me.”

For fuck’s sake, is that a lump in my throat? I can’t remember the last time I felt choked up with emotion. Not since Leonid died.

“I’m really glad you and Aunt Emma are having a baby together,” he adds.

I give him a shaky smile. For the first time in a long time, possibly in my entire life, I have no clue what to say.

EMMA

Usually, I wake up to two little monkeys jumping on my bed. Today, however—silence.

It's glorious. So glorious in fact that it feels too good to be true. Where are the girls? Are they okay? Or should I be more worried about the destruction they're no doubt wreaking on the house?

I end up ruining my peaceful sleep-in by worrying myself awake. I shower fast, dress faster, and sweep my way next door to the girls' room.

It's empty.

I follow my instincts into the kitchen. I hear them before I see them, their little voices raised in excitement.

"I want maple syrup on mine!" Caroline proclaims.

"I want chocolate syrup on mine!" That's Reagan, of course. The kid's a fiend when it comes to chocolate. I swear her veins are straight-up Hershey's at this point.

"Don't worry; we have both."

I'm just about to enter the kitchen when I hear his voice and freeze. I was expecting Kirill, not Ruslan. I hang back and peek in tentatively. I spy Josh just outside the French doors, sitting on one of the deck chairs with a book. He looks pretty tired, considering it's only 8:30 in the morning.

The girls, however, look like little Energizer bunnies. They're both propped up on the breakfast stools surrounding the marble countertops. Ruslan is standing in front of them at the stove, flipping pancakes on a griddle.

I groan inwardly. He's flipping *pancakes* now? It's bad enough that he's got muscles of steel and a face that could make angels weep. Does he have to be a pancake artist, too?

One visual sweep of the kitchen makes it obvious that he whipped them up from scratch, too. My pancakes come from a box. No one's ever accused me of being an overachiever.

I'm trying to figure out how I can gracefully slip away and leave them to it when Rae spots me.

"Auntie Em!" she cries. "We're making pancakes!"

I plaster a fake smile onto my face and walk towards the girls. "They smell amazing."

I'm not even pretending. They actually smell mouthwatering. I spot whole vanilla beans on the counter next to long cinnamon sticks.

"How about a cup of tea?" I do a double take. *Did Mr. High and Mighty just deign to speak to me?* Based on the fact that he's looking right at me, I'm forced to conclude that he did.

"Oh, er, nah, don't worry about it."

He lifts an eyebrow. "You need to get something in your system. And your stomach has been off lately. Tea will help settle it."

I just nod uncertainly while he proceeds to get me a cup of tea. He's treating me nicely right now but I don't trust it. This is only because the kids are here and he doesn't want them to see what a giant douche he is.

But even though I know he's faking it, I still find myself leaning into it. Just a little. Just a very, very little bit. It's nice to be looked after, that's all. To not have to get your own tea in the morning, to have someone ask what you want for a change.

The thing is, I know he's capable of it. He spent months taking care of me

and the kids. Sometimes, it was subtle, like the time he insisted on fixing the coffee table before a game of Jenga because he “refused to have his victory compromised by faulty furniture.” Other times, it was obvious, like when he bought the kids new shoes and refused to let me pay him back for them.

He’s a good man. I’ve seen that firsthand. Which is why this part is so hard.

Seeing the way his eyes harden when they find mine, the way he stiffens instantly as though he’s forced to be constantly alert around me... The familiarity and the intimacy that took us months to build has been torn down so fast I still can’t quite believe it’s gone.

Sometimes, I hate him for refusing to believe me.

Other times, I can see it from his perspective.

Most of the time, I just want him to hold me like he used to.

“Here’s your tea,” he says, interrupting my stream of thoughts.

It smells like chocolate when I lift it to my lips. I raise my gaze to his, but he looks away almost immediately. It’s a clear reminder: just because he’s being nice to me doesn’t mean he’s forgiven me.

He has to tolerate me because of the precious cargo I’m carrying.

Glorified surrogate right here. His words, not mine.

“Thank you.”

“Ruslan, I changed my mind!” Reagan announces with that cheeky grin of hers. “I want a yellow dress like Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*.”

He just flips another pancake onto the already large stack in front of him. “Yellow it is, Princess Rae.”

“What’s this about a dress?” I ask, clearing my throat.

“Ruslan’s gonna get us princess dresses,” Rae replies with a solemn look to let me know just how serious this negotiation is.

I frown. “Why?”

Both girls look at me as though I've just asked the world's stupidest question. "Because we want to be princesses, Aunt Em." The "*duh*" is implied.

"Yeah," agrees Caro. "We're gonna play dress up."

"Is that really necessary? Just use your imaginations. You don't need princess dresses." I turn to Ruslan. "You don't have to do this."

He shrugs me off. "I want to." Then he deposits a short stack of pancakes onto two plates and slides them over to the girls. "Eat up."

I can only shake my head in amazement. How did I lose all authority in a matter of days?

"Ruslan, can we eat outside in the garden with Josh?" Caroline pleads.

The moment Ruslan okays it with a single gruff nod, they're off, leaving me to deal with the broody pancake maker whose expression has twisted into a stiff grimace.

"You know," I warn, "if you give those girls an inch, they'll take a mile."

He starts clearing up the counters, which has the undoubtedly intended benefit of keeping his back to me. "They've been through a lot and they're good kids. They deserve this."

I can't exactly disagree with that. "Here, let me help clean up."

He yanks the batter bowl away from me with a speed that can only be interpreted as insulting. "Not necessary. I can handle it."

I sigh and relent. I know how this story ends. So instead, I concentrate on my delicious, chocolate-infused tea. It's so good it almost makes up for the fact that I can't drink coffee. My gaze veers towards the French doors. The girls have ventured further into the garden. I can spot them in the distance, sitting on the grass with their legs crossed and their plates balancing on their laps. Josh is walking over to them now, his shoulders hunched.

"Josh seems so tired lately." I'm just thinking out loud here, although I should know better than that by now. Thinking out loud is dangerous when you're with certain people.

“He needs a therapist.”

The crackle in his voice has me turning back towards the kitchen. His glower has gotten more intense—which only pisses me off. Of course I know that Josh needs a therapist. I believe *I’m* the one who brought it up with Kirill. A few times, actually.

I’m just about to mention that when he cuts me off. “He’s been suffering silently for a while now and this should have been dealt with a long time ago.”

Is he for real right now? “I was trying to get him some help—”

“When?” Ruslan demands. “*After* he had a full-blown anxiety attack?”

My jaw snaps shut. My instinct is to just walk away. *Don’t stoop to his level.* But to walk away now would be to imply that he’s right about everything.

So I get my soap box out and I get to work.

“Excuse me, but where do you get off judging me about Josh? I’ve been doing the best I can to make sure he’s alright. That’s he’s happy. And safe.”

“*Safe?*” Ruslan scoffs. “If that were the case, you’d have kicked Ben out a long time ago.”

That takes me off-guard but I double down. “It wasn’t that easy. He is their father—”

Ruslan snorts. “Some fucking father. Threatening his kid with physical violence if he doesn’t do what he wants.”

I stop short. “H-he... did what?”

Ruslan glances towards the garden. “Josh didn’t want you to know. He didn’t want you to worry.”

Oh, God. It’s always a bad sign when I hear my mother’s voice in my head. She is the demon of self-doubt that’s haunted me my entire life. And she lit fresh fires that have been simmering evilly since our call a few weeks ago.

Bad guardian.

Bad mother.

Bad person.

“You didn’t know.” Ruslan’s voice is gruff, unsympathetic. “But you should have.”

I agree. But the stress and the pressure of dealing with all these issues on my own for so long has taken a toll. And what’s the point of getting my soap box out if I’m not gonna use it?

“Yeah, you’re right,” I snap. “I should have—but I didn’t. Because I was busy trying to pay the bills and maintain a roof over their heads. I was trying to pay off my sister’s debts and keep the kids in the school they were in before their mother died. I was trying to juggle being a mom *and* a dad *and* the sole breadwinner. So yeah—I did fall short. I doubt it’s gonna be the last time, either. Shocking as it may seem to you, Ruslan, I am human! I didn’t ask for any of this. But I sure as hell tried my best when it landed on my lap.” I slap a hand down on the countertop because I’m suddenly so dizzy with anger that standing upright is a challenge. “Oh, and by the way, I asked Kirill about a therapist *weeks* ago. For *all* the kids. He told me that he would look into it, but I assumed that was his way of saying he needed to check with *you*. We could have saved ourselves a lot of time if I could have just come to you with this suggestion instead of Kirill. But *no*, you’re so damned wrapped up in your own ego that you can’t bear to be alone with me for five seconds without some sort of buffer present. Well, I got news for you buddy: we’re having a baby together. So, like it or not, you’re gonna have to deal with your feelings and talk to me at some point!”

I’m winded by the time I’m done. Ruslan’s face is completely unreadable, but I get the feeling that there are things bubbling around below the surface. Too bad I don’t give a shit about any of them.

“Emma—”

I flinch back from his reach. “Excuse me. I need a swim.”

Swimming has been my preferred form of therapy recently. There’s something about the soothing nature of a big body of water.

It supports your weight if you trust it enough.

It hides your tears no matter how hard you cry.

EMMA

“Wanna take a walk with me?”

Josh squints up at me, suspicious. Then his gaze veers to his sisters, who are both splashing around in the shallow end of the pool with Kirill. “Okay.”

I’ve spent the last three days since my kitchen spat with Ruslan obsessing over Josh. I’ve also spent the last three days observing him. He’s quiet—but he hasn’t always been like that. I try to think back to when that started.

Was it around the time his mother died? Or was it after that, when Ben started transforming from a man into a monster?

I’ve always known that Josh has taken on more responsibility than he could carry but I was never able to prevent it. He was always so staunch and determined. He was also my one ally in this. Which I can see now was a failing on my part. He was never meant to be my ally. He was only ever meant to be a child.

Bad guardian.

Bad mother.

Bad person.

I shake my head to clear the nagging thoughts. “Josh, can we talk?” I ask as we approach the bird bath at the far end of the gardens.

“Bird bath” is a little bit of an understatement. It’s more like a three-tiered

marble fountain you could skip a rock across. The only “birds” big enough to use this properly died with the rest of the other dinosaurs.

“About what?”

“About your father.” He stops walking instantly. I have to double back a little. “Josh?”

“I don’t want to talk about him.”

“Sweetheart, I know it’s hard, but—”

“Ruslan told you, didn’t he?”

I nod, not wanting to lie to him. “He did and I’m glad he did. But I would have preferred hearing it from you.”

Josh looks away. “Did he tell you about the part where I used to go into your purse and steal your credit cards for Dad, sometimes?”

That fucking bastard. I make sure to keep my expression neutral. “No, he didn’t.”

Josh flushes. “I’m sorry, Aunt Em.”

I grab him and pull him against me. “Josh, *I’m* the one who’s sorry. I should have realized what was happening. I should have prevented him from using you, from treating you like that.” I put my hands on his shoulders and push him back just enough so that I can see his face. “Did he really hit you?” It feels as though my heartbeat is in my throat.

“Sometimes,” Josh admits in a small voice.

I pull him back into my embrace. “God, I could *kill* him. I’m so sorry, Josh.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“Yes, it is. I should have left with you guys a long time ago. I think I just wanted to believe that Ben would get better. I wanted to believe that he would come out of it and things would go back to normal. Or as normal as they could be without your mom.”

Josh gives me an uncertain glance. “Was he different with Mom?”

“Very,” I admit. “A different man entirely.”

“Maybe she took that man with her when she went.”

From the mouths of babes comes wisdom... I wrap my arm around Josh’s shoulders and we continue on toward the bird bath. “I won’t let him hurt you ever again. I promise. I swear it.” When we get to the fountain, I sit down on the edge of it and position Josh right in front of me. “But, Josh, you need to tell me when something like that is going on. I can’t protect you if I don’t know what’s happening.”

His forehead wrinkles. “I didn’t want you to know. I wanted to protect *you*.”

I’m so close to tears at this point. I swallow hard and remind myself that *I* am the adult here. “My sweet boy, you have too much on your shoulders. Let me carry some of the load.”

He only shakes his head again. “You’re having a baby. I can share the load.” He nods with finality, as though that’s the end of it. His jaw is set in that stubborn square, the one that reminds me so much of his mother.

I’m seeing her more and more now in her children. As much as it breaks my heart, it also makes me feel like we’re not so far apart anymore, she and I.

“Can you do me a favor then?” He nods begrudgingly. “Will you speak to a therapist? I understand that you want to take care of your family, Josh. But sometimes, you have to put your own oxygen mask on first.”

“Like in airplanes?”

“Exactly like that. So will you agree to speak to someone who can help?”

He hesitates, then nods once more. “Okay, Aunt Em.”

I kiss his forehead. “That’s my boy.”

We spend the next twenty minutes sitting by the bird bath, enjoying the water, sunlight, and the few brave crows who are willing to venture close to us.

Every time I see Josh smile at their squawking, I get all warm inside. But the feeling is short-lived. He’s eight years old. He shouldn’t need a therapist at

this age.

Bad guardian.

Bad mother.

Bad person.

I need to talk to Phoebe. I need a shoulder to lean on. I need to hear my friend tell me that I may be a flawed person, but I'm not a terrible one.

I may not believe her.

But it would help to hear it all the same.



I slow down the hallway when I hear Ruslan's voice booming from inside his office. "What do you mean, you 'forgot' to add it to the schedule? I reminded you three times yesterday!"

I don't hear the other part of the conversation so I'm assuming that whoever he's yelling at is on the phone.

"Jesus *fucking* Christ. What time did you say?... It's 4:00 P.M. right now, Melissa. I was supposed to be there half an hour ago."

I cringe. I would *not* want to be Melissa right now.

I wait for the conversation to end before I knock twice. "What?" Ruslan bellows from inside.

Too late to back out now. I open the door and walk in.

The moment he sees me, his eyes flash with darkness and he scowls. "What is it?"

"Bad time?"

Endless piles of paperwork cover the surface of his desk. So much of it that there isn't a trace of mahogany to be seen through all the scattered reams.

“The fuck does it look like?”

For some reason, I creep further into the office. I take one look at the chaotic schedule that his new temp has organized for him and my eyebrows hit my hairline.

“You have two different meetings scheduled for the same time tomorrow morning,” I point out.

“My dimwitted new assistant apparently thinks I can be in two places at once.”

I bite down on my lips to keep from smiling. “You know, I *do* have secretarial experience. I can help you—”

“I’d rather hire a circus clown.”

I narrow my eyes. “Sounds like you already did.”

For a moment, I think I’m gonna get a smile. But that’s apparently too much to ask for. Instead, his mouth hardens into a flat line.

It still looks extremely kissable, though.

The problem—well, one of the problems—with all this doom and gloom and anger is that Ruslan doesn’t *look* any different. He’s still as gorgeous as he’s always been.

Which is not to say I’m still not pissed off about our last interaction. It still haunts me at night; it rings in my ears during the little silences that pepper every day. Even that much feels like a betrayal to myself. Being attracted to a man who treats me like shit? *Have some self-respect, girl.* And yet, my body doesn’t seem very interested in being loyal when it comes to Ruslan.

“Seriously, just give me an hour here and—”

“I don’t need or want your help, Ms. Carson.”

I glare at him. “Fine. I’ll leave you to your messed-up schedule and your idiot assistant. I just have one question.”

“Oh, so there’s a question? I thought you’d just come in here to annoy the hell out of me.”

I phone in the fake laugh. “So funny. Truly hilarious. Take that show on the road; you’d slay.”

“I don’t have all day, Emma.”

It’s amazing how he can give me two such opposing reactions. On the one hand, there’s frustration and anger. On the other hand, there’s desire and need. If only I could turn off my heart—and my vagina—and simply leave him in the rearview mirror...

Life would be so much easier.

“I want to see Phoebe.”

“So FaceTime her.”

“I know this is a foreign concept to you, but I need human contact. Some in-person, face-to-face, I-can-see-her-and-she-can-see-me contact. So I thought I’d invite her over here one day. I just wanted to run it—”

“I don’t want anyone coming in or out of the estate unless they’ve been vetted first.”

“So vet her.”

“The process takes two months.”

I have no idea if that’s true or if he’s just being an ass but I decide to put on my problem-solver hat and give him another option. “Fine. Then can I get my car keys back? I’ll go meet her outside the estate.”

That suggestion at least gets me a little eye contact. I’ve forgotten how obnoxiously beautiful those amber eyes are.

Who am I kidding? Of course I haven’t forgotten.

“No. Out of the question.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Did you not hear a word I just said? It’s not safe out there. You really think I’m gonna send you out into the world where you’re vulnerable?”

My heart quivers just the tiniest amount. If I squint and turn my head to the side and sort go cross-eyed a little bit, it almost looks like he cares about my safety.

“You’re pregnant,” he adds. “I’m not about to let you carry my heir into harm’s way.”

Well, there goes that theory. And since he’s just shot my request down, I have no reason to be polite anymore. “So what you’re saying is that I’m your prisoner?”

“At least until the baby is born.”

“That’s *months* away, Ruslan.”

“Lucky for you, this is a big estate. Go explore it.”

“Let me take Kirill with me then,” I suggest. “He can protect me. He can be my personal bodyguard, if that’s what it takes to get me out of—”

Ruslan slams his palms down on the desk and rears himself up to his full height. I’m not quite sure which part of that suggestion ticked him off the most, but suddenly, he looks very pissed. His nostrils flare, his eyes shoot daggers at me, and he’s wearing a violent scowl that shows off his sharp canines.

“No one will be escorting you anywhere.”

“You escorted me to the doctor’s.”

“I am different.”

“By that, do you mean you’re a complete and total asshole?” I yell. “Because if so, I completely agree! You *are* different.”

“This is about your safety!”

“No! This is about your fetish for control.”

He rounds the table, his chest rising and falling heavily. “Oh, I don’t presume to think I can control you. You’re the one pulling the strings, aren’t you, little *kiska*?”

I can't lie—hearing him use that word on me again sends a shooting thrill up my spine. But I'm too pissed off to care. Much, much too pissed off.

“Right,” I spit, getting right up in his face before he gets in mine. “Because I'm just the devious whore who seduced you in order to use you and then sell you out to the highest bidder. That's the narrative you've created in your head, huh? Maybe I should just freaking lean into it.”

His eyes flash—with anger? Or excitement? I really don't know.

“You don't want to fan that fire, *kiska*.”

“Or maybe I do,” I hiss. “Maybe I should just be your whore. Get on my knees and make the big, bad CEO happy, just for the chance to invite my friend over? That's what you expect of me?”

“Emma...” There's a clear and obvious warning in his voice but the adrenaline is pounding hard. So is my vagina. It doesn't help that he's so close that I can feel his heat, his scent. My body remembers how it feels for him to move inside of me.

“You want me to be your whore again?” I push. “Is that it?”

“Stop it.”

I don't even know where to start with processing what I'm feeling right now. There's so much to unpack. The first and most dominant layer is longing. Then there's desire. Anger. Resentment. Sadness. Fear.

After that, more longing.

So much longing.

My eyes connect with his. That fire-bright stare makes me feel like I'm in real danger. I've been burned before but that look has the power to do so much more damage.

If I let it.

“I'm leaving,” I announce.

I turn to run from this very bad decision when his hand shoots out and grabs my arm. He pulls me backward until my ass hits his desk. Then he plants

himself in front of me, snuffing out any chance of an escape.

“You think you get to decide when you can leave?” he growls. “You think you can just tease me and walk out?”

I shiver as his breath tickles my cheeks. He keeps a vise grip on my gaze, refusing to let go of it.

Or of me.

Or of all the fragile parts of my heart he’s owned from the very beginning of this adventure that I still can’t quite bring myself to fully regret.

“You’re not the one pulling the strings, *kiska*. I am.”

RUSLAN

It's not like I don't already have a lot on my plate.

Sergey is still missing.

My team managed to pilfer one of Adrik's samples of Sopernik and, coincidence of coincidences, it happens to be chemically identical to Venera. Which only confirms what I already knew to be true: that unoriginal bastard not only abducted my lead chemist; he's also ripping off my moneymaker drug right before my eyes.

If that weren't enough, I have a moron for an assistant who I can't bring myself to get rid of, just in case she's replaced with an even bigger moron.

And now, *she's* here.

Prime time for Emma to start fighting back. Right when I'm too fucking weak to resist her. To resist *this*.

All those weeks of keeping my distance, all those times I turned away from her—all those little moments have built up and I can feel the dam start to crack. I should have let her run out of this office like she clearly wanted to.

But I didn't.

So now, she's trapped between me and the desk, her blue eyes fixed on mine with a fire that makes me think she's not all that mad about it.

"Maybe I *should* make you my whore again. Is that what you want?" I

murmur as I move in on her.

She pushes her shoulders back and her chest out. It's a fighting stance. But honestly, she doesn't really need it. Everything about her right now tells me that she's more than ready to do battle if she needs to.

"I would tell you what I want," she says. Her tone is cold and focused. "But you wouldn't understand."

I lean in towards her, grazing my lips from her ear to her cheek. "I understand that you're good at this game."

"That's exactly the difference between us: this is not a game to me."

I pull back a little and make the mistake of meeting her eyes. They're so bright right now, shining with whatever you call the thing that comes before unshed tears.

"No?" I ask. "Tell me something: why did you *really* come in here, *kiska*?" She flinches. I wonder idly if I've stumbled on something here. Curious, I dig my heels in and place my hands on either side of the desk, locking her in. "Tell me."

Her lips part. *God, what I would give to bite down on those lips right now. The things I'd do. The prices I'd pay.*

"I knew you would refuse me," she admits.

"But you came anyway. See?" I say triumphantly. "It *is* a game."

"You call it a game; I call it survival." Her breath catches for a moment and, just when I think she's done talking, she says, "Yes, I came here even when I knew you would say no. But I just wanted an excuse to be in your space. I wanted to be near you. Because... because I *miss* you so damn much. Even if you're not here."

Is this real? My cock certainly thinks it is. My body is completely won over and it wants her so badly that every breath I spent not inside of her is absolute agony.

But my heart remains cautious. My mind is wary.

I can't let her in again...

"I'm right here," I rasp. "What's there to miss?"

She shakes her head and lifts her hand to my face. Her fingers are light as a feather as they dance along my cheek. "No, you're not. You're not here at all. I miss the *old* Ruslan. The man who carried me to bed after I fell asleep. Who covered me with a blanket to make sure I wouldn't get cold at night. I want the man who took care of the kids for me so that I could fall apart in peace. I want the man who looked at me as though I was special. I want *that* man."

Every word she says strikes a chord. It hits some deep buried part of me that I'd hoped would never resurface again.

But every time she's near me, I can feel it stir. Like a hibernating beast who catches his first whiff of spring.

There are so many problems with that.

The first problem is that I'm hard as rock.

The second is that, every time I look into her aqua blue eyes, the need inside me gets harder to ignore. I can't take that stare anymore. It's pushing me too damn close to the edge.

So I grab Emma without warning and twist her around. She gasps but she doesn't move. She goes perfectly still in my arms, waiting to see what I might do next.

I'm curious, too.

"*He* is not here anymore," I snarl into her ear as I grind my erection into her curves. "*He* doesn't exist anymore."

Emma just breathes one solitary word that undoes me. "*Liar.*"

She fucking dares...

It makes me furious. It also makes me even harder than I already am. She just feels too damn good, nestled against my body, melding into my shape. Her soft curves against my hard lines. Her innocence against my sinfulness. Her fire against my fire.

“You’re asking for trouble, *kiska*.”

“I’ll take what I can get.”

Is it possible to come from a damn conversation? Before now, I didn’t think it was. I’m starting to reconsider.

Before I can stop myself, I slide my tongue over her earlobe. She gasps and wriggles in place, her ass pushing into my cock.

“The man you want is gone. But *this* you can have.”

Her breathing hitches up as I start ripping her skirt up. Her legs spread of their own accord; I don’t even have to help them apart. When I can reach them, I rip her panties off, and when she’s bare, I put my hand on the back of her neck and push her down so that I can line my cock up with her slit.

She’s sopping wet. I almost slide inside her before I’m ready. It takes every ounce of willpower I possess not to do that.

Emma jerks, gasping desperately, pushing that juicy ass up eagerly. I slap her cheek once and tear her blouse open. I want to feel those lush tits before I enter her.

They’ve changed since her pregnancy. They’re bigger, rounder, so much perkier. I squeeze hard enough to make her cry out. *Good*. It can’t all be pleasure. Pain is a necessary reminder.

“R-Ruslan,” she whimpers.

I squeeze her tits and nip at her neck with my teeth. The tip of my cock slips inside her, but I’m not all the way in yet.

“Please,” she begs.

“You’re my little whore, aren’t you?” I growl in her ear. “You’re my dirty little slut.”

Her shivers intensify. “Yes,” she moans. “Yes, yes... just fuck me.”

My balls feel like they’re about to burst. But I’m nothing if not disciplined. At least, I was once—before her. Maybe I can find a way to toe that line. Maintain all that discipline I’ve honed over the years. Keep her at arm’s

length while still having her whenever I want.

“Is that what you miss?” I hiss. “Being my whore?”

She stiffens and goes silent, so I push myself into her a little deeper.

“N-No... I miss *you*.”

“You can’t have me,” I warn. “But you can have this for tonight. And only tonight.”

I wrap my hand around her neck and she pushes her ass back. Just like that, my entire length slides inside her, filling her up completely. She cries out.

At the same time, a strangled moan escapes my own lips. It’s never felt quite this intense before. Maybe it’s true what they say about hate fucking—it’s a dangerous force to mess with.

Not that either one of us has the power to stop it. Now, that I’m balls deep, there’s nothing on heaven or earth that could keep me from fucking the life out of her.

With each impassioned thrust, I question what I’m doing. Not just to her but to myself, too. *What if this is just another manipulation? What if she’s trying to worm herself back into my life? What if she’s trying to break down the barriers I’ve only just built back up again?*

The more I fuck her, the less I care.

I’ll think about it later.

For now, there’s just me and her.

Plus the heightened echoes of our combined moans, the slick heat of our bodies as they collide, the vague sense that I’m slowly undoing everything I’ve worked to keep steady.

It doesn’t take long before she comes. And the moment I feel her walls constrict around me, I know that I won’t be able to hold out much longer, either. Gritting my teeth, I empty myself inside her. I fill up her pussy just like I filled up her womb.

The thought is enough to make me hard all over again.

Mine.

Fucking mine.

When I pull out of her, I notice the cum start to drip down her thighs almost immediately. She doesn't reach for a tissue, though. She just starts to put on her clothes. Apparently, she remembers my requirements from the last time we let this happen.

Her face is impassive at first. But her mouth starts to curve down as the dust settles. There it is: *reality hitting*.

I know I've hurt her with my distance and my disdain. She's trying not to show her pain, but the wound is still raw. It still stings every time I look at her.

I zip myself up and turn towards the door. I see her reflection in one of the many black framed mirrors in the office. She's staring at my back, waiting for something. Some sign of hope. Something to cling to.

But I have nothing to give her right now. So, instead of pretending, I just walk away and leave her to my empty office.

Even when I was deep inside her, I knew that fucking her was a mistake. Still, I couldn't help but think...

Some mistakes are worth making.

EMMA

It's his cum that snaps me out of it.

It drips down the inside of my thigh, searing my skin like lava. As soon as he's gone, I grab a handful of tissues and wipe it up violently. I'm going for the trash can when spite and anger take a hold of me and I drop the bunch of them into his messy desk instead.

Serves him right.

Serves me right, too. I should have known that entering the lion's den was a mistake. Honestly, I deserve this shitty feeling in my chest. I mean, what kind of woman lets her ex hate-fuck her?

A woman with *very* low self-esteem, that's who.

But you know what they say: hindsight is twenty-twenty. Before I walked into his office, I'd felt confident, almost in control. I'd come in here with a purpose. A mission. *Let me see my best friend, goddammit!*

It seemed like a simple enough request but of course I should have known: *nothing* is simple when it comes to Ruslan Oryolov.

It took mere minutes for him to twist my simple request into a fight that turned into a pathetic, one-way confessional. I cringe when I think about the things I'd admitted to him.

I miss you.

I just want to be near you.

I could freaking kick myself. How many times do I have to remind myself that he wants nothing to do with me?

No, that's not quite true. He *does* want something to do with me—when it involves my body. He's perfectly happy to fuck me silly. But he doesn't want to *talk* to me. He doesn't want to *be* with me. He called me his dirty little whore and, idiot that I am, I agreed.

Honestly, I deserve to have my feminist card revoked.

I storm out of his office like I should have done long before he pinned me to his desk and trapped me with those iron arms. I stomp through the house like a woman on a mission. The maids jump to the side the moment they see me. Little do they know, I'm the woman who's *lost* the whole damn mission.

Lost the plot, too, at this point.

Idiot.

Bad guardian.

Bad mother.

Bad person.

Idiot. Whore. Idiot.

When I get back to the east wing of the house, I hear the children's voices coming from the kitchen. I groan internally. My head is already pounding and those voices are nothing if not keyed-up right now.

The girls are running circles around the kitchen island while the chef maneuvers out of the way. Josh is curled up in the breakfast nook with a book in his lap.

"Auntie Em!" Reagan cries when she notices me. "Do you wanna play Tag with us?"

"Not right now, sweetheart. In fact, I think we should end the game right now before poor Chef Cadeau gets knocked right over."

The French chef gives me an appreciative smile. “I am making macaroni and cheese for dinner as per ze children’s requests, madam,” he says in his slightly accented English. “And for you?”

Since I have zero appetite, I beg off dinner and join Josh in the breakfast nook. He’s frowning so hard at this book that I’m half-worried he’s about to take a swing at it.

“You okay, kiddo?”

“The girls have been screaming and running around all day. I have a headache.”

I sigh. “You and me both.”

Apparently, Reagan and Caroline have decided to ignore me because they’re still playing their spirited game of Tag.

“Girls!” I raise my voice just so I can be heard above the din. “Can we use our quiet voices now? It’s almost dinner time. I can see your dolls off in the corner. How about you play with them until dinner’s ready?”

They scurry to the corner where they’ve dumped their dolls and politely lower their voices a few notches. Thank God for small favors.

I cross my legs but I can still *feel* him inside me. I should have gone up to my room first and showered. I should have washed him off me. I hate that it didn’t even cross my mind before now. I hate even more that a part of me doesn’t want to lose the scent of him on my skin.

I spoke too soon about the small favors, though. “No! That’s *my* doll!” Caroline’s shrill voice is a drill to the side of my head.

“But *I* want to play with her. You *never* let me play with her!”

“Give her to me—”

“No! Get your hands off—”

“Will you both stop yelling?” Josh roars before I can intervene. “You’ve been fighting all day.”

They immediately loop us into their battle. “She won’t let me play with her

doll!” screams Caro.

“She takes the clothes off!” protests Rae.

“Because I want to dress her myself. Like a mommy does.”

“Stop screaming!”

“*You* stop screaming!”

“ENOUGH!” The silence that follows my cry is immediate and prickling with tension. “Honestly,” I continue, “with the fighting, fighting, fighting. All day and all night. It’s driving me crazy. I want all of you to be *quiet*.”

Josh’s eyes are huge when he turns them on me. Even the girls look flabbergasted. Caroline’s mouth is hanging open and Reagan’s bottom lip is trembling.

I *never* yell at them. That’s usually Ben’s forte. But me? Even when I’m having a bad day, even when the kids are being their worst selves, I don’t yell. I discipline them, yes. But I’ve never resorted to unnecessary screaming or punishments. The fact that I’m doing it now is a direct result of the current state of chaos my mind has been submerged into.

I’m angry and frustrated at myself. I’m battling demons in my head and the kids’ squabble was just getting tangled up in my misery. That’s all there is to it.

Which is why I feel horrible.

I have no right to take my anger out on them just because I’ve lost control of my own life.

Idiot.

Bad guardian.

Bad mother.

Bad person.

Idiot.

I'm just about to apologize when one of the maids walks in. She's wearing a deadpan expression as she hands me a piece of mail stamped with an official seal on the flap.

"It arrived a few minutes ago, ma'am. By registered courier."

I accept the intimidating white envelope with a slight nod and the maid disappears almost instantly. That whole "staff must be seen and not heard" rule in this house is no joke.

I tear open the seal and pull the papers out. My fingers go cold first. Then my arms. Then the rest of me.

This document was drawn up by lawyers representing Beatrice and Barrett Carson.

My own damn parents are suing for custody of the children.

I try to breathe through the panic. As naïve as it sounds, I didn't think they would take it this far. But apparently, Beatrice wasn't kidding when she accused me of being a shitty guardian.

I feel so stupid for letting it come to this. I thought that, because Kirill and Ruslan were handling it, I didn't have to worry any longer. I'd just kinda relaxed, assuming that the temporary custody I had of the children would stick.

They were safe from Ben at least.

But now that my parents are trying to get custody, what might that mean?

Lord knows they have the money and the connections. Barrett plays golf twice a month with a prominent New York City judge and Beatrice is on the boards of half the society clubs in the city. They're also pissed off enough with me to see this through.

My head spins and the pounding only gets worse.

What am I gonna do?

How do I fight this?

Is there anyone in my corner?

“A-Aunt E-E-Emma? Are you ok-kay?” Josh’s voice cracks through my haze of worry. But I can barely hear him over the pounding in my ears. I don’t hear Caroline or Reagan when they chime in, either.

I want to reassure them but I can’t seem to find my words. Maybe because, before I can reassure them, I have to reassure *myself*.

I glance towards Josh. I can’t tell him; he carries too much already. The girls are far too young to understand. So I just shake my head instead and try to get to my feet.

I need to read through this document. I need to know what I’m dealing with.

I need to...

... stop moving.

Is the kitchen spinning or is that just me?

“Aunt Emma!”

“No!”

“She’s *falling!*”

Oh, God...

The spinning turns the world into a whirlwind of color and then, just like that

—

All the colors fade to black.

EMMA

You know you've hit an all-time low when you come to from a fainting spell and all you can think is, *Well, that was restful.*

That sense of ease lasts for about three seconds before the silence clogging up my ears gives way to squeals and cries and anguished yells that I'm not capable of processing just yet.

I try to open my eyes but they're still heavy, still clinging to the need for darkness. Someone's touching me... my arm? My right arm, yes. No, not touching—nudging. Whoever it is is trying to prod me awake.

Something cool hits my face. It's not unpleasant but I'd rather do without it, to be honest. I like the warmth of the darkness and I don't want to be reminded of the cold when I wake up.

“Hey, kids, let's move aside, okay? Give her some room to breathe.”

Now, *that* voice is soothing.

Ruslan's? Is that his? My ears are still ringing so the actual tenor of the voice is lost to me. I can't identify the speaker and I don't want to know who it is enough to open my eyes. So I lie there, taking it all in.

Every other sensation is heightened. I can feel the scurry of little panicked feet. I can sense the rasp of heavy breathing. I can smell cheesy goodness in the air.

Dammit, I must have ruined dinner. And the kids love mac and cheese.

Bad guardian. Bad mother. Bad person.

“Emma.”

There’s that voice again, calm and soothing. *Please let it be Ruslan.* I have no idea why I want him right now. Especially considering I just left his office wanting to get as far away from him as possible.

The last few months set a bad precedent. He caught me every time I fell and now, I seek out that comfort and security without even realizing it.

“*Emma.*”

Maybe it is him. Maybe seeing me passed out on the floor has reverted him back to the man he used to be before he believed I’d betrayed him. Maybe I’ve gotten my wish. Maybe the gods have decided that I’ve suffered through enough and they’re taking pity on me by bringing *my* Ruslan back.

Yeah freaking right.

Maybe pigs will fly, too.

“Emma, can you hear me?”

The voice is gaining in character. Definitely not Ruslan. A tear slips down the edge of my closed eye. Why is it that sometimes every kind little gesture that he *doesn’t* do feels so much worse than the cruel and awful things he *does* do?

“Is she gonna be okay, Uncle Kiki?”

Of course. Kirill. That makes more sense.

“I-is Aunt Emma g-g-gonna d-die?”

“No, of course not. She just needs some rest, that’s all. I’m gonna make sure she’s okay.”

“Where’s Ruslan?”

Probably skulking off somewhere, cursing the day he laid eyes on me.

I force my eyes open, if only to convince the kids that I’m gonna be okay.

I've already yelled at them unfairly today. I don't want to burden them with any more trauma than I've already given them.

Honestly, maybe my parents have a point. They might be better off without me.

"Auntie Em!"

"Look, she's awake!"

I open my eyes to find four hazy faces hanging over mine. The girls look relieved but Josh's eyebrows are pulled together uncertainly.

"Okay, kidlets, let's move to the side again. I'm gonna pick her up and take her upstairs."

I try to groan in protest—*You're better off without me; just leave me here where it's dark and warm and quiet*—but before I'm ready, Kirill scoops me up into his arms. I'm not even doing the moving myself but the vertigo hits all the same. Any hope of arguing goes up in smoke.

I'm vaguely aware of Kirill saying something to the kids. He must be telling them to stay in the kitchen and finish their dinner because, when he takes me upstairs, no one follows us.

By the time he places me down on my bed, I'm mostly in control of my faculties. I can see and hear normally. The pounding in my head has subsided and the ringing in my ears has eased.

Kirill passes me a glass of water. "Here. Drink."

"Thank you," I murmur. "Are the kids alright?"

"They're worried about you, of course. But I assured them that you'd be okay. And I'm gonna keep that promise. Which is why the doctor is on his way now."

I cringe. "That's really not necessary."

"You fainted, Emma."

"My parents sent me a little gift. Caught me by surprise."

He nods grimly. “I saw. Don’t worry; we can handle it.”

“You don’t know my parents.”

“They don’t know Ruslan Oryolov.”

I frown. *I’m not sure I do, either.* “Have you told him about this?”

“No.”

“Good. Can we keep it that way?”

His eyebrows spike downward. “Emma...”

“Please.” I fold my hands together in prayer. “I just fainted. Do you really want to bring about a relapse?”

He chuckles. “The fact that you’re threatening me tells me you’re feeling better.”

“So you can tell the doctor not to come?”

The chuckle falls flat. “No chance.”

I groan and let my head collapse back onto the pillows. “Maybe I will catch a break one of these days. But today is not that day.”

Kirill offers me a small smile. “Listen, Em, I think it might be a good idea to bring in some reinforcements where the kids are concerned.”

I squint up at him. *Guess I can add Kirill to the list of people who think I’m a terrible mother.* “Like a nanny?”

“Exactly like a nanny. That way, you can rest a little more and you don’t have to worry about them quite so much.”

If only... “If we’re talking nannies, then I’d rather have Amelia here than anyone else. She knows the kids and they love her.”

Kirill purses up his lips. “She’ll have to be vetted.”

“I know, I know. The process takes two months.”

He blinks in confusion and shakes his head. “Um, no, it mostly takes a few

weeks. Or less. Usually less.” I can only shake my own head in disgust. *Of course it does. Ruslan was just being an asshole.* “But I can try and speed it along.”

I reach out to grab his hand in my weak grasp. “Kirill, seriously: don’t tell Ruslan about this.”

“Why not?” He sighs, clearly frustrated. “He deserves to know about this, Emma.”

“I’m not sure about *deserves*, but we can come back to that. I’d just rather not have him involved.”

“He’s the father of your child.”

“He’s also the bane of my existence. And I don’t want him to know about this!”

Kirill pulls back a little. I wonder if he can see the truth on my face. And the truth is, I don’t want to give Ruslan another reason to think that I can’t take care of these children, including the one in utero.

Kirill still hasn’t agreed to keep my secret when Dr. Owens walks in. The doctor fixes me with that kindly smile of his, which, to my surprise, does make me feel marginally better. He gives me a standard examination, checks my pulse and my vitals, all while Kirill stands off to the side like a watchful guard dog.

“Well, Doc?” Kirill asks when the doctor finishes jotting down his notes.

“Everything seems to be alright, *except—*” I cringe internally as I await the imminent bad news. “—your blood pressure is far too high.”

I have to repress a snort. *Gee, I wonder why that could be.*

“We’re gonna have to monitor that carefully,” he continues. “High blood pressure can be very damaging to both mother and child.”

And I thought keeping this baby safe would be easiest while it was inside me. Apparently, I can’t even manage to do *that* right. Sienna didn’t have high blood pressure during any one of her pregnancies. She’d coasted through all three in high spirits. Leave it to me to screw the simple part up.

Bad guardian.

Bad mother.

Bad person.

“I’d recommend weekly visits to the hospital for precautionary examinations. At least until we can bring your blood pressure down and determine that you and the baby are completely out of danger.”

I look at Kirill hopefully, praying he decides to take pity on me and keep this between us. But his eyes are fixed firmly on the doctor.

I know that look. It never ends well for me.

“Can we determine the cause of the high blood pressure, Doc?”

“Our last exam was two weeks ago. Given that Emma has shown no sign of preeclampsia and no prior history of high blood pressure, it seems to me that this is stress-related.” He turns his gaze on me. “Have you been under any undue stress lately, Emma?”

I double-down on the cringe. “Well...”

The doctor seems to take that as confirmation. He gives me an understanding nod and pats my arm. “Pregnancy is hard enough as it is. Add social and familial pressures and it becomes exponentially harder. Emma, my dear, you need to do whatever it takes to reduce the amount of stress in your life. For your sake and the baby’s alike.”

I swallow hard, keenly aware of my heart throwing a fit inside my chest. Ironically, all this information is really not helping my blood pressure.

“Let me schedule another appointment for you early next week,” Dr. Owens concludes. “Until then, drink lots of water, meditate, and try to rest as much as you can.”

Kirill takes over from there. “Thanks, Doc. Let me show you out.”

He’s about to follow Dr. Owens out the door when I stop him. “Kirill!” He turns reluctantly, no doubt because he knows exactly what I’m trying to ask him. “Please?”

He shakes his head. “Just rest, okay?”

Then he shuts the door and I sink into the bed, wondering how my life went so wrong, so fast.

RUSLAN

TAP, TAP, TAP...

Vadim has been tapping his way through this entire damn meeting and I'm about to explode on his ass if he doesn't stop right fucking now.

"Is there something wrong with your finger, Uncle, or is there something you want to say?"

The tapping stops.

Thank fucking God.

Then he starts to talk instead and I immediately regret my choice to speak up.

"I am concerned, nephew."

No shit. We're all fucking concerned. Of course, some of us are more concerned than others. Fyodor, for example, looks like he'd rather be in his gardens, tending to his roses and his chrysanthemums. If there ever comes a day when I'm more interested in begonias than business, I'm just gonna have Kirill put a bullet in the back of my head and call it a day.

"There's reason to be," I agree. "My orders weren't followed the night of the launch. And it's not *my* men that did it."

Vadim's eyebrows rise. "Is there someone you're accusing?"

I lean over my folded arms. "Let's review the facts: Sergey is missing and Venera samples were tampered with the night of the launch. Both those facts suggest that this is an inside job."

Vadim's eyebrows peak higher. "Are you trying to accuse someone in this room?"

The moment he speaks, everyone in the boardroom stiffens—with the exception of my father, who still looks like he's barely paying attention. My gaze flickers over the three other men present today.

Mikkeli Petrov—one of the chemists that helped Sergey develop Venera.

Josef Vinogradov—head of the security team that was in charge of protecting Venera samples and overseeing its circulation.

Andrei Belov—my logistics consigliere. The man responsible for recruiting an entire apparatus of dealers and delivery services to inject Venera into the lifeblood of the city.

All of them have something to lose by working against me, so it doesn't make sense that they would fuck up an operation with massive personal payouts. Still, *someone* had a motive. It may not be obvious right now, but that's only because my perspective is incomplete. I don't have *all* the information.

But I can smell it.

Right there in front of me.

Just out of reach, but getting closer by the day.

"I'm not accusing anyone in this room. Yet. But I do think that we need to keep a close eye on Adrik Makarov."

"Wasn't Kirill supposed to be doing that?" My father meets my eyes for the first time during this meeting. "Speaking of your second, he's not here. He's never missed a meeting before."

He's right. Kirill should be here. And he better have a good fucking reason for—

Speak of the devil.

When the door swings open to reveal him, Kirill's face is somber. He doesn't make eye contact with anyone as he walks in and heads straight for me. He

doesn't make apologies, either.

Which can only mean one thing—trouble.

He leans in, his lips close to my ear, and whispers, "Something came up." I nod, giving him permission to continue. "It's Emma."

That's all he needs to say. Before I know it, I'm out of my seat and flying towards the door.

"Ruslan?" Vadim's voice is stunned, but I ignore it and storm out of the boardroom.

Kirill trails right behind me, shadowing my furious walk down the hall. I wait until we've turned the corner and there's no chance of Vadim or anyone else in the boardroom being able to spy on us. Then I whirl around to face Kirill.

"What the fuck happened?"

He holds up his hands to pacify me. "First of all, she's okay. But she did have a fainting spell."

Kirill's reassurance ought to calm me down, but as it turns out, it doesn't do shit. *I need to see her myself.* "She fainted?"

"Yes. I had the doctor come to give her a check-up when she came to."

"And?"

"Her blood pressure is high. There is a risk—to both her and the child."

An angry growl bursts through my clenched teeth. I need to fucking *do* something. I need to break shit. I need to use my fists. I need to do some real damage. Every time I think I'm in control, something happens—almost always involving that frustrating little *kiska*—that reminds me it's all just an illusion.

I can't even fucking yell about it because, other than Kirill, no one knows that Emma's pregnant. I have no doubt Fyodor and Vadim will be pleased, albeit for very different reasons, but it's not information I'm inclined to share just yet.

It's all too much right now and I don't want any of my uncle's unsolicited

advice or my father's long-winded speeches about the importance of family.

What I need right now is to make sure Emma is alright.

But considering the way I left things...

"Fuck!" I snarl as I resume moving down the corridor towards my office.

"Ruslan," Kirill snaps, chasing after me, "wait!"

I don't wait. I'm already pissed off that Kirill was the one to handle this situation. *I should have been there. I should have been the one to call the doctor.*

Maybe what I'm most pissed off about is the sneaking suspicion that, quite apart from being the solution, I may have been the fucking problem.

To make my black mood even blacker, I catch Melissa's eager face when she jumps to her feet the moment she sees me. "Oh, hello, Mr. Rus—"

"Oryolov," I snarl. "It's Mr. Oryolov."

"Right." She giggles like the insipid dolt that she is. "Can I get you a coffee?"

"Read the fucking room, Melissa."

I stalk into my office and slam the door, forgetting momentarily that Kirill is right behind me. "Oh, you ass—!" he exclaims as the door narrowly misses taking out his nose.

But his reflexes kick in just in time and he's able to pound the door back. "Brother," he scowls as he follows me in, "you have *got* to calm down."

"Calm down?" I spit, pacing furiously. *How can I calm down when she's at risk?* But that's not what I say. What I say is, "How can I calm down when the baby's at risk?"

Kirill's eyes narrow. He plants himself right in front of me, breaking my frantic pacing. "Ruslan." His voice is heavy with accusation. "If you don't slow down for a goddamn minute and *listen* to me, you're gonna lose your heir. In fact, you might just lose them both."

I force my heart rate down as I focus on Kirill. He looks just as angry as I feel

right now.

“Dr. Owens gave her a full exam. Her blood pressure has spiked in the few weeks since her last check-up. Which means it’s not a condition that requires treatments or drugs. It’s *stress*.”

My fault.

My fucking fault.

“I get that you’re pissed at her. I know you feel betrayed. But right now, she’s carrying your baby. She doesn’t need to be punished; she needs patience and care. She needs to be *looked after*.”

As much as I hate getting a damn lecture from my second-in-command, I know I have to hear this. I know he’s right.

“It’s stress?” I ask tentatively.

Kirill nods. “She’s going through a lot right now. Her parents are suing for custody of the children. She’s got no one to talk to but me and those kids. She’s completely isolated and it doesn’t matter how big your estate is—to her, it’s getting claustrophobic.” He takes a breath and his clenched jaw softens marginally. “I know you’ve got a lot going on, brother. But so does she. You want this baby to be born safe and healthy? Then you’ve got to be a little gentler with the mother.”

Blyat’.

I stare back at Kirill. I can see all my mistakes, all my stupidity reflected back in at me through his eyes. I tear myself away and head for the door.

I’m done talking.

I need to go back home.

I need to see her.

RUSLAN

The kids are all over me the moment I get back home.

It's not the usual excitement I'm met with, though. There's a fearful kind of desperation in the way they flock around me. I take a few minutes to sit with them before I go upstairs to check on Emma. I balance a little girl on each knee and look Josh head-on when he sits down opposite us.

"Is Aunt Emma going to be alright? Kirill said we weren't allowed to disturb her," Josh tells me quietly. His voice is shaky, his lip quivering, that stutter peeking out to show just how badly he needs to be reassured.

Caroline nods. "Yeah, even after we promised not to fight anymore."

Reagan's bottom lip is going a mile a minute. I run a hand down her beautiful curtain of hair. "Listen to me: your aunt is strong. She's going to be fine. It's just that growing a baby isn't easy. So we're all going to have to be really mindful of that from now on, okay?"

"We won't fight anymore!" Reagan promises. "And if we do, we'll fight far away from Auntie Em."

I suppress my smile. "Good girl. Now, how about you guys play in the garden while I go upstairs and check on your aunt?"

"We're gonna have a picnic with Amelia."

I turn to Caroline. "Amelia?"

“*Ahem.*” I glance up and see a young woman standing in the threshold of the living room’s open arches dressed in oversized, paint-stained overalls that make her look like a giant toddler. “Hi,” she says awkwardly. “Mr. Kirill hired me to take care of the kids for a few hours every day.”

I put the girls down and walk over. “Kirill hired you?”

She gulps under my gaze. “H-he made me sign an NDA. I believe the words ‘silence on pain of death’ were also used.”

“Good,” I growl. “Then he covered my bases.”

She has the audacity to look insulted, which incidentally makes me respect her more. “You don’t have to worry about me. I can keep a secret. And I love those kids. I love Emma, too. She’s been really good to me over the years.”

I have no trouble believing that. I’m learning that I also don’t mind a little fire in the people taking care of my family, even if it’s not the kind of thing I’d normally tolerate from a subordinate. “Alright then. I won’t keep you from your picnic.”

She looks me in the eyes for a moment longer before nodding, satisfied. Then she takes the girls’ hands and they all step out onto the patio.

I leave them and make my way upstairs. When I try Emma’s door, I find it locked. *Breathe, motherfucker*, I coach myself. *She needs your patience now. As hard-to-find as that may be.* I take in a long inhale, release a long exhale, and then I knock.

“Who is it?”

“Ruslan.”

A beat of silence. And then: “No thank you.”

“Emma. I just want to see how you’re doing.”

“Tell Kirill he’s an ass. And we’re not friends anymore.”

It’s good to know that he’s still got my back even in the face of his newfound affection for Emma. I need to tone down my inner asshole around him. The man doesn’t deserve it.

“Open the door.”

“No. I’m fine. Just leave me alone.”

Fuck the expensive Himalayan timber—I could just break this goddamn door down. The only reason I don’t is because I don’t want to add to her already elevated stress levels.

Instead of wasting time trying to reason with her, I head to the electrical power room on the first floor. There’s a small safe in there to which only Kirill and I have the combination. Among other things, it contains a spare key for every room on the property.

Her face drops when I open the door and walk in, but I can tell from the way she falls back onto her pillow that she’s not in a fighting mood today. She looks so small and frail in that big California king bed. Her cheeks are pale, too. I’ve never wanted to protect her more.

I’m just having a hell of a time figuring out how to keep her safe from myself.

“I’m not in the mood to fight, Ruslan,” she mumbles.

“That makes two of us.” I drag a chair over to her bedside and sit down. She flinches away from me as though touching would be dangerous. “How are you feeling?”

She stares at me incredulously. “How do you *think* I’m feeling?”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Her jaw drops. “With *you*?”

I can’t even justify rolling my eyes, as much as I’d like to. Considering the way I’ve treated her lately, it’s a fair question. “Yes, with me.”

“Why would I want to talk about it with you?” she laughs. “Why would I want to talk to you about anything?”

Again—fair.

“Because I’m asking.”

The vein in her forehead has just made an appearance but it's not throbbing or anything. It's just peeping out shyly to say hello.

“Okay. Then why do you care?”

Because I care about you.

But again, I don't say what I *should* say. “Because you're carrying my child.”

Her eyelashes flutter and she looks down. Her lips quiver for only a moment before she looks back up again. “Of course. I should have known.”

“You've been under a lot of stress lately,” I offer.

She snorts. “That's the understatement of the damn year.”

“Is it—” *Me?* “—the custody issue?” She's still not meeting my eyes so I take Kirill's advice and go gentle. “You can tell me, *kiska.*”

Little by little, I'm prying her open. Not with force or violence, the tools I used to use. But with kindness. Tenderness.

Fuck it—with love.

And I can see it working. Her face softens. Her eyes brighten. She opens her mouth and it all comes out.

“It's *everything,*” she breathes. Her voice catches at first, but the more she keeps talking, the steadier she becomes. “It's this house; it's my future; it's you and me. But mostly, it's those kids. What if I don't get to keep them? What if Beatrice and Barrett win custody and I lose them?” Her tears are flowing freely now. “I promised Sienna I would keep them safe and happy. I stood in front of her headstone the evening we buried her and I promised her that I would never let them be subjected to the kind of childhood we were subjected to. It was right after then that Mom and Dad approached me for the first time with their offer to take the kids off my hands. That's how they phrased it, too. ‘*We'll take them off your hands.*’ Like it was a freaking burden, like I'd be *happy* for the chance to get rid of them. They didn't understand even then. It wasn't a burden to look after those kids; it was a *privilege.*”

Her chest is heaving from her impassioned words. It's bringing the color back

into her cheeks.

Fucking hell, is she glorious.

She looks me dead in the eye. “I know I’ve fallen short but I still believe that raising them is a privilege. I may not be a great mother, but I’m gonna try my hardest to become better. I’m never gonna stop trying.”

“Are you crazy?”

Her mouth clamps shut. She leans away, eyes round with shock.

“For fuck’s sake, Emma: you are the *best* mother I have ever seen. You have everything stacked against you but you make those kids think the world was made for them and them alone. You struggle so they don’t and you’d jump off a bridge before you let them see you quit or show fear. You give them so much love, so much hope, so much reason to believe that the future holds nothing but happiness for them.”

Her eyes grow wider the more I talk. And even then, I keep talking. “Why do you think I picked *you*? Before I met you, I didn’t even want a child. Then I saw you with those kids and I thought, if I was ever gonna have a kid, *this* is the woman I want to have one with.”

She blinks and a fat tear rolls down her cheek. “Ruslan,” she breathes softly, “do you really mean that?”

“Every fucking word.”

She bites her lip. Still uncertain. As if saying with her body, *Prove it.*

So I don’t hesitate. I slide into the bed beside her and wrap my arms around her. *This is for the baby. I’m being gentle to manage her stress. I’m being whatever she needs me to be until this baby is born.*

If I pick at that logic too much, it’s gonna unravel fast. So I focus on her slow breathing and her citrus and honey scent.

She’s still crying, her tears soaking through the front of my shirt. I hate seeing her like this. It’s worse knowing that I contributed to it. As penance, I will hold her for as long as she needs me to.

It's a self-serving penance, though. I know it; she knows it.

Pretty sure the damn doorknob knows it, too.

“Don't cry, Emma.”

“I want to believe you. But too many people have told me that I'm a shitty mother now for me not to believe it.”

I grit my teeth. “I shouldn't have said those things to you. That shit I said about you, with Josh... it was uncalled for. I was wrong. I'm sorry.”

She twists to the side so that she can look up at me. “I think that's the first time I've ever heard you say that.”

I snort. “Don't get used to it.”

She actually smiles. It's tentative and it's watery, but it's real. And it *does* something to me.

“I wouldn't dare...” She plays with the buttons of my shirt, pressing her body harder against me. She's wriggling a little too much now for my liking. It's giving my cock all kinds of ideas.

The top button of my shirt is open, so she slides her hand through the opening. Her fingers are warm and needy, just like the rest of her. My cock is still wet from the last time we fucked but you'd think, given how full my balls are right now, that I'd been celibate for months.

“*Kiska...*”

“Hm?” She's practically grinding on my leg. And given my position, it's entirely obvious how hard I am. Her hand glides over my chest, down towards my erection.

I could stop her. I *should* stop her.

But I don't.

“Was this the plan all along, my needy little *kiska*?” I growl. “Is that why you're grinding all over me? Was the last time not enough for you?”

You'd think that would stop her. But she meets my gaze boldly. “It bothered

me for a split second yesterday, when you called me your whore.” She palms my cock and starts rubbing slowly. “But I realized today: you can call me anything you want—as long as you also call me *yours*.”

Fuck me.

My lips crash against hers. I push her back against the bed and get on top.

I’ll worry about the consequences of my complete lack of discipline tomorrow. For right now, I want to claim her. I want to own her. I want to *consume* her.

For all her betrayal, all her deception and all the lies, there’s no denying it anymore: the woman belongs to me.

One betrayal’s not gonna change that.

EMMA

I wake up to an empty bed rich with his scent.

I'm not sure how to feel right now. My body is sore in the best possible way. I feel calmer than I have in weeks.

But I don't trust this feeling.

Last night comes back to me in short, vivid bursts. The moment he pushed inside me, his thick girth filling me up with one hard thrust. The moment our palms met, chests met, foreheads met, like we were zippered together, sharing air and a heartbeat. Eyes flashing. Sweat between us, salty and pure.

Too many moments like that.

I want more of them and I want less at the same time. How much longer can this strange back-and-forth go on between us? How long can we stand on quicksand and expect not to be sucked beneath the surface?

I wipe the sleep from my eyes and roll over. That's when I notice the piece of paper pinned beneath my phone on the bedside table.

He left me a note?

I jump for it as though it's about to disappear at any moment. Definitely Ruslan's handwriting. Hungrily, I lap up his words, hoping for something personal.

The note contains the name and number of one of his lawyers, Isabel Costa,

as well as the name and number of a child therapist, Alicia Young.

I sit back in bed, the note still clutched between my fingers. One is to help me keep custody of the children. The other is to make sure that they're happy and healthy. I suppose in a way, it *is* personal; it *is* sweet.

Maybe this is his way of showing me how much he cares. If not for me, then at least for the children.

Although last night went a long way in showing me that whatever we shared before everything went to shit is not totally gone.

Maybe I gave up too fast. After he accused me of betraying him, I just stopped trying to convince him otherwise. That was just pride on my part. If he was so sure that I was a backstabbing bitch, then I figured I would just *let* him think that. Was I really going to degrade myself by begging him to hear my side of the story when it was clear he didn't want to?

But now, it feels silly and juvenile. *Of course* I should have forced him to hear my side of the story. I should have screamed it at his back if I had to! Anything to make him hear me. It isn't about us; it's about the child we're going to be raising together. That child deserves some semblance of peace and normalcy.

So do the other three.

The first thing I do is call Alicia Young. She's polite and professional and she agrees to make a house call after breakfast to speak to Josh.

After I get dressed and go downstairs, I prepare Josh for the appointment. He's quiet and thoughtful but he doesn't seem reluctant to talk to her. I get in a few quick words of advice before he tells me, "I get it, Aunt Emma. It'll be okay. I'll talk to her."

The girls are in the pool when Alicia arrives. She's younger than I expect, probably in her mid-thirties with a stylish bob and thick, purple-rimmed glasses that go a long way in winning me over.

Josh hangs back on the patio while I approach Alicia. "I'm Emma."

She smiles pleasantly. "Mr. Oryolov explained the situation to me on the

phone. I'm just gonna spend fifty minutes with Josh, get to know him a little bit." She pats me on the elbow. "You have nothing to worry about."

I give her a shaky smile in return. "I wish it were that simple."

"I understand that you feel the onus of responsibility—but trust me, Emma: the hardest thing you can do as a parent is ask for help. No person is an island."

That actually does make me feel a little better. It also makes me hopeful that Dr. Alicia can help Josh. She walks over and introduces herself to him and I eavesdrop as she spends a few minutes asking him easy questions.

How old are you? What do you like to read? You play basketball? What team do you like?

After a while, Josh's shoulders have relaxed considerably and he's actually talking animatedly about the basketball team he played on last season.

She's good. I shouldn't be surprised. Ruslan would have made sure to enlist only the very best. I wonder bitterly how long her vetting process took.

When she signals to me that they're ready, I direct Dr. Alicia and Josh to the room on the ground floor that's been dedicated as his therapy room. Then I spend the next fifty minutes sitting by the pool, picking at my nails and trying to let the girls distract me.

Please let it go well. Please let it go well. Please let it—

"Aunt Emma, Joshie's waving for you," Caroline informs me.

I jerk out of the pool chair and rush inside where Josh and Alicia are waiting for me. I study Josh's face for any signs of a mental breakdown. But all I see is an easy smile.

"Can I go swim now, Auntie Em?" he asks eagerly.

"Of course, honey. Have fun."

He high-fives Dr. Alicia goodbye and runs outside to join his sisters. "How'd it go?" I ask the moment he's out of earshot.

"He's a wonderful kid, Emma. You've done a great job."

I cringe nervously. “You don’t have to cushion it for me. Just tell me straight: how badly have I screwed him up?”

She raises her eyebrows. Then she puts her hand on my shoulder and looks me in the eye. “He’s a strong and resilient boy. He does struggle with anger and resentment, but that’s aimed squarely on his parents, mostly at his father. None of it is for you or Mr. Oryolov. In fact, as far as I can see based on that first session, the two of you are his heroes.”

Those words are a balm for my soul. It’s enough to make me want to throw my arms around the doctor and kiss her. If it weren’t totally inappropriate, I’d freaking do it.

“Really? You’re not just screwing with me?”

She nods. “He may be only eight, but he’s one of the most observant, most aware kids I’ve ever met. He knows exactly how much you’ve sacrificed to take care of him and his sisters. He’s also extremely grateful to Ruslan for taking all of you in and giving you a home. It seems that, for the first time in a while, he feels safe.”

He’s not the only one who’s thankful to Ruslan for that.

“I do think I should start seeing him at least once a week,” she adds. “It’s important that he’s able to talk to an objective person about everything that’s going on. He doesn’t want to burden either you or Ruslan with anything.”

“But we want him to!”

“I understand. But for right now, I think you need to give him time and space, so that he can come to you eventually. Oh, and Emma?”

“Yes?”

“You haven’t screwed him up. Believe me: you *saved* that child. And you should be proud of it.”

It doesn’t get much better than a professional telling you you’re not a shitty mother. “You better get out of here now before I do something crazy and kiss you,” I warn her.

She laughs. “See you next week, Emma. I’m already looking forward to it.”

After she's gone, I walk back to the pool and lean against the French doors. Josh is splashing his sisters, laughing louder than I've heard him laugh in a while.

I find myself wishing that Ruslan were here to hear this. I wish he were here so that I could tell him that Josh is gonna be okay.

And *he's* a big reason why.

RUSLAN

I need to put some distance between myself and all this accountability I've been avoiding since Emma landed in my home. Kirill's call gave me the excuse I needed to get the fuck out from underneath her pleading blue eyes. Those eyes are the heart of the damn problem, because they make a man want to do crazy things.

Like... *forgive*.

Like *forget*.

Like *apologize*.

My phone pings with coordinates for a location, sent by Kirill. It's smack dab in the middle of nowhere. I get into one of my more understated vehicles, a black Range Rover, and load the location details into my GPS. Then I call Kirill from the car.

"Well?"

"We've got the place surrounded. It's a fuckin' dump."

"Who zeroed in on the location?"

"Credit goes to Vadim here. Your unc really pulled through for us."

Nice to know my uncle is more than just an outdated figurehead with a breeding fetish.

“Is he there, too?”

“Yup. He and his team are on the other side of the house. We’re trying to determine if it’s booby-trapped.”

I snort. “You really think Adrik has the resources for that if he picked a shithole to keep one of the most valuable assets he’s stolen from me?”

“There are cameras everywhere,” Kirill muses dubiously. “We’ve pinpointed at least seven around the perimeters of the property and the tech squad is still working on identifying any we might be missing. Speaking of, do you want me to take them down before we move in?”

“No,” I growl. “I want that fucker to see me take back what’s mine. Then I want him to watch as I burn down everything else.”

“Aye-aye, captain. ETA?”

“Seven minutes.”

“See you soon.”

When I get to the location—which lives up to Kirill’s description as a desolate shithole miles away from civilization—Vadim is standing outside one of the SUVs with my second-in-command lounging at his side and murmuring rapid-fire into a walkie-talkie.

“Decided to join the party?” Vadim asks with a toothy smile.

“Congratulations, Uncle. I heard that you’re the man to thank for this find. You’ll have to tell me how you did it.”

He seems jumpy as he gives me a distracted smile. “I don’t want to be accused of bragging. We should really move fast.”

“No need to worry. Adrik doesn’t have the balls to challenge me openly. It’s why he’s resorting to all these underhanded methods of attack. He knows he doesn’t stand a chance otherwise.”

Vadim’s gaze flickers across the property. “You’re that sure we’re dealing with Adrik here?”

“Who else could it be?”

He shrugs. “Not everyone loves the Bratva.”

“Okay,” Kirill says as he turns his attention up to us. “It looks like we’re dealing with a dozen men. Fourteen, at the most.”

Fourteen? The number feels low, considering what they’re protecting. What the hell is Adrik up to?

Vadim seems to be thinking the same thing I am. “Adrik’s clearly got the Venera formula duplicated by now. Sergey has served his purpose. Losing him now won’t be a huge loss.”

“Maybe not,” I snarl, reaching a sudden decision point. “But he’s still my man and I’m not going to leave him to rot in there.” I raise my fist in the air and bring it down hard, giving my men the signal to move in from the surrounding territory. “We don’t need prisoners. Kill them all.”

Vadim’s eyes flit to me. “Your father would advise mercy.”

“And what would *you* advise?”

He flinches before sighing. “Kill them all.”

Nodding, I pull out my gun and follow my men into the house. The first gunshot breaks the silence. After that, it’s a no-holds-barred free-for-all. The air comes alive with the smell of blood and the groans of our dying enemies.

It’s over far faster than I’d hoped for. Mere minutes after the violence begins, silence resumes. My men clear a path for me to the back of the house where Sergey is being held. I have to kick the door down to enter it. Debris flies as the old wood cracks and splinters beneath my heel.

We sweep through, guns at the ready, but there’s no need. The room is empty but for one person.

Sergey is chained to a chair in one dusty, cobwebbed corner. He’s slumped over, his neck bent, his chin hanging down to his chest. He’s not conscious. In fact, it looks like he’s barely breathing.

Which means only one thing: he may have cracked, but it took extreme torture to do it.

“Kirill!” I roar.

A few more straggling gunshots sound—executing the last of Adrik’s rabble—and then everything goes quiet. Kirill rushes into the room a moment later.

“Is he dead?” he blurts as soon as he clocks the scene.

I check his pulse. “He’s still with us. But barely. We need to get him to a hospital immediately.”

“On it.”

After Sergey has been stretchered out to the caravan of SUVs, I step over one of the enemy bodies strewn in the hallway and turn to Andrey, a lieutenant waiting at attention for my next batch of orders. Lucky for him, the next step is simple.

“Burn the whole fucking place down.”

Then I get into the same SUV that’s transporting Sergey to the hospital. As we pull away, plumes of smoke start to spiral out from the inside of the dilapidated building. It should take only a few minutes for the fire to consume and destroy the whole structure.

I’m coming for you, asshole, I whisper silently to Adrik, wherever the hell he might be. And when I’m done, a little fire will be the least of your concerns.



It takes hours in the hospital before Sergey opens his eyes. Well, *one* eye. It appears that his left eye is going to stay closed for a while.

He blinks and sighs with the reluctant hesitation of a man who’d rather just close it and succumb to the darkness.

They put him through hell. He has half a dozen broken ribs, a shattered nose, a fractured leg, chemical burns across his right arm and patches of skin missing from his left. The scans show the inside of his body is as much of a wreck as the outside. Lung collapsed, organs bruised and bleeding.

I think about writing it all down so I can make sure to repeat the exact same

pattern with Adrik.

“Sergey.”

He starts quivering in place. The monitors he’s attached to start beeping with alarm. A nurse rushes to his side. “Sir, he can go into cardiac arrest if he panics like that.”

“Sergey,” I try again, softer this time. “You have nothing to fear anymore. You’re safe now.”

His lone working eye flickers to the nurse and then back to me. “I-I... t-told them... the formula... I t-t-told them...”

I give the nurse a dismissive grunt. “Could we have a moment?”

As soon as she leaves, I sit down on the chair next to Sergey’s bed. “I know.”

He gulps. Apparently even that hurts because he flinches and groans softly. “A-are you going to k-k-kill me?”

“No.”

His eye goes as wide as it can. “W-why?”

“Because you endured all of this—” My hand sweeps to gesture down toward his broken body. “—before you cracked. And for that, you have my respect and my gratitude.”

He stares at me with his mouth hanging open. “Am I d-dreaming?”

I stand up and he flinches back again. “I misjudged you. I assumed that it wouldn’t take much to make you talk. But I was wrong. You have nothing to fear. You won’t have anything to fear ever again. You’re safe now, Sergey. You have my word.”

Tears start slipping down his cheeks in tiny rivulets. But the fear still hasn’t left his gaze. “I-I’m not safe. I will never b-be safe...”

“Yes,” I repeat, “you will. Because I am going to find the man who did this to you and I’m going to make sure he receives the exact same treatment.”

Sergey flinches. “S-sir... if it’s all the same to you... I’d rather just... live in

peace.” More stray tears run down his face. “I’m done with this life...” He says it hesitantly, glancing at me and away and back again the entire time, waiting to see what form my wrath will take.

But there’s no wrath to be found here. None for Sergey, at least. I’m a cold-hearted bastard—but I reward loyalty.

“If that’s what you want, my friend, then I will arrange it. The old Sergey will die in this place. All the official records will confirm it. But you can choose the shape of your new life. Pick your name, your home—choose what you want to be and I’ll make it all yours.”

His breath hitches up in his chest and his bottom lip trembles. It’s the most emotion he can possibly show, given the damage to his body.

“I take care of the people who have been loyal to me, Sergey.” I get to my feet. “Kirill will have your new documents ready in a few days. Until then, rest. Your body will heal.”

His mind, on the other hand... That might take much longer to heal, if it heals at all. The most I can do is help him transition into a civilian life so that he can try and forget his previous one.

The moment I leave the hospital room, I pull my phone out and call Kirill. Seeing Sergey like that has put things into sharp perspective. There’s something I need to take care of and the sooner it’s done, the better.

“I need you to draw up new papers for Sergey. New ID, new passport, the works. He wants out.”

There’s a beat of silence. “And you’re okay with that? We’ll lose his expertise.”

“Then I’ll find another expert. Sergey has done his time. He deserves the chance at a different kind of life.” I clear my throat. “But before you get on that, I need you to call an emergency meeting for tonight. The Oryolov inner circle.”

“Fuck me. Really?”

I look out at the city skyline in the distance. Somewhere out there is Emma.

Adrik. The kids. All the different pieces of this game, scurrying around beneath the cover of the shadows. One way or another, this will come to an end soon.

I intend to make it the finish I desire.

“Yes. There’s something I need to take care of.”

RUSLAN

The Oryolov inner circle.

It's no joke, I'll tell you that much.

The last time an all-hands meeting was called, it was to establish succession and determine who would succeed Fyodor as *pahkan*. This is the first time I've ever called such a council myself. All six men sitting around the dining table of my Manhattan penthouse know it's important. Most of them also know to hide their curiosity a little better than my uncle does. Vadim's never met a moment of suspense that he's liked yet.

"Don't keep us waiting any longer, nephew," he calls out. "Why are we all here?"

I keep my back on the table while I finish the shot of whiskey I just poured myself. Then I walk to the head of the table. "Thank you for being here tonight on such short notice."

Vadim's eyes stay fixed on me with eagle-eyed precision. He's barely blinking. "No one here would ever dream of turning down an invitation from their *pahkan*," he murmurs.

I nod. "I'm sure you've all heard the rumors."

"Which ones?" he asks with a chuckle. "There have been so many."

"The ones relating to my assistant."

Fyodor's head snaps from the view out the window to me. The only change in his expression is a slight arch in his eyebrow, but I know my father well enough to interpret that as keen interest. The rest of my senior *vors* lean in. Vadim is the only one who sinks back in his chair, a smug smile spreading across his face.

"The contract is real," he proclaims. He slams a fist on the table. "I fucking *knew* it!"

I narrow my eyes. "This so-called 'contract' is merely a rumor," I say dismissively. "I'm here to talk about Emma Carson and her children."

"What *about* them?" Vadim asks impatiently.

"They are in my home now and under my protection. They will be from now onwards."

I'm aware that my revelation is not very clear. I haven't explained what Emma is to me or why she happens to be in my home and under my protection. That will come later. First, I have to figure out a way to explain it to myself.

"Is she your woman or not, nephew?" Vadim asks bluntly.

The beast inside me roars to life. *Mine*. If there was ever a question, that answers it right away. I'm not about to deny it now.

"Yes," I growl, "she is. And as such, those three children are mine as well."

The *vors* look shocked. Mikael has paled, Arkady's nonexistent eyebrows are raised to the roof, and Nikolai's gaze keeps darting from face to face. Even Vadim looks taken aback.

Fyodor is the only one who's smiling. He raises his glass of gin. "Well, then congratulations are in order."

That seems to snap everyone else out of their stupor. They raise their glasses, too, albeit hesitantly. I understand the shock, though—I've always been very vocal about remaining unattached. This change must seem abrupt from their perspective.

From mine, though, it only seems inevitable.

Vadim's dark eyes twinkle with mischief when they land on me. "Can we expect a wedding anytime soon, Ruslan?"

I nearly choke on my whiskey, even as images of Emma in a white gown, walking down the aisle toward me, invade my head and refuse to be dismissed. "That's premature. The only reason I bring it up is because it is relevant for our defenses against Adrik Makarov."

My father nods. "You have my full support, *syn*. As do your woman and the children."

It's been years since I heard my father sound so strong. I'm not even sure if "strong" is the right word. Just more *certain* than he has been since we lost the rest of our family.

Whatever you'd call it, it seems to act as a signal to the rest of my men.

"Of course, your family can count on my protection, too," Mikael chimes in.

Arkady raises his glass a little higher. "And mine."

"And mine," Nikolai adds.

I give them all an appreciative nod. "I appreciate you all. *Spasibo*."

Kirill stands up and meets my gaze over the heads of the sitting men. "Guess it's time to celebrate then. Let's bust out the cigars."

Once there's a comfortable smoke haze floating over us, Fyodor turns to me. "You have made me proud today."

I raise my eyebrows. "Claiming a woman has made you proud?"

He shakes his head. "Taking on the responsibility of a family is what has made me proud. You are never so focused as when you have something to protect. Trust me, son: there is no greater reward, no greater blessing than creating a family."

"In Ruslan's case, his family has come ready-made," Vadim butts in with a smile, helping himself to his second cigar. "Tell me, nephew: will you name the bastard boy your heir or do you actually plan on making one yourself?"

His tone rankles. It's poisonous, the way he talks about them. *Bastard boy*. I

don't like that one fucking bit. Nor do I like the subtle irritation dancing beneath his words, the suggestion that his birthright is being snatched away from him once again.

But I can understand it, even if I despise it. I'll forgive his resentment—well, not forgive, but I'll turn a blind eye to it. It doesn't matter in the end. Vadim might not like my choices, but he will not oppose his *pahkan*. He wouldn't dare.

Family is everything. It is the one absolute rule that he has always followed no matter the circumstances.

“That is premature as well, Uncle Vadim,” I say icily.

“There's no rush,” Fyodor agrees. “After all, Emma and Ruslan have time to make plenty of babies.”

Like the thought of Emma in a gown, images of her and me with a few children of our own pops into my head far too quickly. It makes me feel... infinite. Damn near invincible. This is the first time I've understood what Fyodor and Vadim meant when they used to talk about legacy.

Emma as my wife. The children we already have gathered around us. More of them yet to come bundle up in her arms, in mine.

The feeling that stirs up... I don't know how to name it or what to do with it.

But God knows it's doing something to me.

Perhaps that's why I decide to drop the bomb on them now. “The first one is already on the way.”

Vadim's head snaps towards me. Fyodor's mouth pops open. “The woman is pregnant?” my uncle asks, stunned.

I nod, but I'm focused more on my father. I thought he was already as upbeat as I've seen him in years. This, though... I've *never* seen him look like this. It's unsettling, mostly because it reminds me of a time when he smiled often. Those smiles were usually reserved for my mother.

“An heir...” Vadim breathes. He still looks shell-shocked. “Are you sure?”

“She’s just completed her first trimester.”

“This is... This is... My God.”

“Have I turned you speechless, uncle? I didn’t think it was possible.”

He clears his throat, grabs his glass, and stands up. “A toast,” he says gruffly. “To the future heir of the Oryolov Bratva.”

Everyone cheers to my unborn child. There’s this strange, burgeoning feeling in my chest that I can’t quite name. Satisfaction? Joy? Pride?

When Vadim settles back into his seat, I address the whole table. “For now, I want Emma’s pregnancy kept under wraps. It’s a dangerous time for the Oryolov Bratva and I need to make sure she and the children are removed from it all.”

A murmur of agreement rises from the table. I sit back, feeling more confident than I have in a while.

I have a plan.

But most importantly, I have a family.

Now, the one thing I have left to do is to figure out a way to keep it.

RUSLAN

Keeping my family begins here. At the offices of *The Brooklyn Gazette*.

For starters, that name's got to go. It stinks of shoddy reporting and lowbrow paparazzi. Considering Remmy Jefferson has a tiny cubicle down the hall, that about confirms it.

This building is gonna need a fucking makeover, too.

I don't plan on coming here often, but when I do, I want somewhere to sit that doesn't erupt with cockroaches the moment my ass touches the chair.

There's a tentative knock on my door and then the portly assistant whose name I've already forgotten pokes her head inside.

"Sir? He's here. Should I send him in?"

I smile. It's a day for genuine grins. Things are happening now that should've happened a long, long time ago. "Please."

She holds the door open and Remmy Jefferson walks in looking extremely confused. His confusion transforms to shock when he sees me sitting at the desk that, only last evening, belonged to someone else entirely.

His nostrils flare with panic when the door snaps closed behind him. He looks around the barren office like I might have goons here ready to beat him senseless.

No need. I can do that myself.

“W-where’s Leonard?”

I cock my legs and lean back in the rickety chair. “Leonard? I don’t know a Leonard. Unless... Oh! Of course. Silly me. Do you mean Leonard Mathers, publisher and editor-in-chief of *The Brooklyn Gazette*? *That* Leonard?”

He bares his teeth at me. “Yes. *That* Leonard. What have you done to him?”

I take the name plaque that sits obnoxiously at the front of the table. I observe it with interest for a moment before I toss it in the trash can. *Leonard Mathers*. “So many things to get rid of...” I muse under my breath.

But I’ll start with the biggest piece of trash in front of me.

“I’ll call security,” Remmy blurts.

I laugh at that one. “And tell them what?”

“That you’ve abducted our publisher and... and done God knows what to him!” His fingers are trembling, as is his lip. His skin has lost what little color he had left. He looks like a walking ghost.

Soon, he’s going to be a real one.

“There’s no reason to involve God,” I scold. “You can just ask me what I’ve done to him. Or you could ask the board, too. They know what happened to Leonard Mathers as well.”

Remmy’s eyes go wide as his tiny little brain finally starts putting all the pieces together. “T-there’s been talk the last few days. Talk of a... b-buyer for the paper...”

I didn’t think it was possible for a person to be any paler. Remmy has taught me one thing today, at least.

I spread my arms wide to encompass this whole godforsaken building. “Welcome to my newspaper, Mr. Jefferson.”

He balks. “No. No! It’s not possible. It’s too fast. It’s—”

“*Done*,” I growl. “It’s already fucking done. Of course I had to pay a little extra to get Leonard out of my seat so fast but when you have money like I do, what’s an extra million or two between friends?”

He looks like he's going to be sick.

"If you're about to throw up, aim for the window," I order. "This office smells bad enough as it is."

"Y-you can't do this."

I shrug. "I already have. I am the official owner of *The Brooklyn Gazette*. That name's going the same way Leonard went, by the way. As a matter of fact—everything is going."

Remmy's eyes are a fraction away from popping out of their sockets entirely. "Y-you did this to stop my article from circulating. My exposé on you. You did this to stop it."

I shake my head calmly. "I did this to protect my family."

"You did this to salvage your *reputation*."

"My reputation was never in danger. Yours, on the other hand... Well, it's precarious, to say the least."

"You're going to fire me?"

"Once the paper has printed retractions of your articles, I'm going to be ordering an exposé of my own. Your name will look good in a headline, I think. *Reporter Caught Fabricating Lies, Harassing Witnesses*. 'Phlegmy Remmy,' they'll call you. Leonard suggested that himself. Has a nice ring to it."

He shakes his head and stumbles backwards. His hands paw at the air in search of something to hold onto, but he comes up empty. "No... you're gonna ruin me. No one will hire me ever again..."

I smirk. "Trust me, Mr. Jefferson: that is the least of your concerns."

His eyes dart around the office again, probably looking for the red sniper dot he thinks is aimed at his forehead. "W-what do you want from me?"

"It's a little late to be asking that question, don't you think?"

He reverses course and stumbles forward, fear winning out over every other emotion as he collapses to his knees in front of my desk. "Are you g-going to

k-kill me?”

“It does seem like the cleanest way to end this.”

He sucks his breath and teeters from side to side like a puppet on clipped strings. “Please. Please, I’ll do anything. *Anything*. Just let me live.”

I lean forward and regard him. If anything, he’s even more pitiful than I pictured he would be. I suppose he’s taught me two things today.

You can always sink lower.

“Alright then. Let’s start with an honest conversation, shall we?”

He gulps. “W-what do you want to know?”

“Start from the beginning. Start from the moment you approached Emma for the first time.”

He’s shivering violently. His hands grip the head of the chair as he struggles to breathe, to think, to talk. “If I tell you everything, will you let me live?”

I tilt my head to the side and consider it. “That depends on how honest you are.”

Words start pouring out of his mouth in a repulsive, stuttering torrent. “I followed her, okay? Even after she said no. Even after she told me to take a hike. That’s what you want to hear, right? I figured I just needed to wear her down. Figured that, if I waited around long enough, you’d kick her to the curb, treat her like shit. All you rich men, you treat women the same, like they’re dispensable—” He eyes me warily but when I don’t say anything, he continues. “I figured she’d get her feelings hurt and then she’d come running to me.”

“And when that didn’t happen, you decided to continue stalking her?”

His tongue flicks out to moisten his thin, chapped lips. “I was following a story; I’m a reporter. It’s my job to do anything for a story.”

“Does that include pushing a defenseless woman down a flight of stairs?”

He stops short. His gaze drops. He’s sweating now. Beads of perspiration roll down the sides of his forehead despite the fact that it’s actually quite cool in

here. It'll be even cooler in just a moment, when I throw this poor bastard's body through the window.

"It w-wasn't like that! I didn't push her. I fell; I must have taken her down with me."

Anger is coursing through my veins now. The mere thought of this son of a bitch laying hands on Emma, pulling her tumbling down the stairs...

He must see the bloodlust on my face, because he gulps loud enough to echo around the tiny office. "I wasn't looking to hurt her, okay? I just wanted to get her to talk!"

"And when you realized she was unconscious at the bottom of those stairs... Tell me, Jefferson: what did you do then?"

We both know what he did. *He ran*. I've seen the fucking footage. But I want to hear him say it. I get to my feet and he scoots back on all fours like the roach that he is.

"Y-you promised you wouldn't kill me!"

I laugh and crack my knuckles. "I don't remember making any such promise. Just like you don't seem to remember what happened after you pulled Emma down that staircase with you. Memories are tricky things, aren't they?"

He's drooling in his terror. It slicks his wobbly chin and the front of his stained shirt. The man disgusts me in every way possible. "I left, okay?" he cries out, more spittle flying everywhere. "I saw that she was unconscious and I fucking ran."

"Like the coward you are. Say it. Say what you are."

Emma was pregnant then. I don't expect this weasel to know it, but it makes all the difference in the world. She had my baby inside of her when he took her down those stairs. She had my future in her womb.

"Y-yes... I'm a c-coward."

I saunter around the desk and he keeps backing up so far that he hits the shelf on the opposite wall and dislodges a couple of books that rain down on his head.

“Keep going. You’re not done with this story yet.”

“I kept following—”

“*Stalking*,” I snap. “Don’t sugar coat what you did.”

He swallows. “I kept stalking Emma... and I noticed how things were between her and her brother-in-law.”

I nod grimly. So far, Jefferson’s version of events is lining up with Emma’s story.

“I approached him one day and offered him a payout if he agreed to help me dig up dirt on you and Emma. So he started snooping around for me. A few days later, he found the contract in the glove compartment of her car. I recorded that conversation. It’s on a flash drive in my top desk drawer.”

Goddammit. I mean, I’m relieved. But I’m also pissed off.

With myself, mostly.

She never sold me out. She never betrayed me. It was her deadbeat leech of a brother-in-law who turned her life upside down just to make a quick buck.

“Th-that’s it, okay?” Jefferson pleads. “That’s everything. I told you everything. Just please, let me—”

I swoop down, haul him up by the spit-flecked front of his shirt, and break his sentence off with a fist to his face. I let go of him as the blow lands, so he goes smashing into the wall-mounted shelves. The drywall crumbles instantly and the whole thing caves in on him, a shower of books and wood and asbestos raining on the *mudak*’s head.

He’s a sniveling pile of limbs as I advance closer. His nose is once again broken to bits, courtesy of me. I’d say he’ll need surgery to fix it, but he won’t live long enough for that to reach the top of his list of concerns.

He blinks open, face streaked with drywall dust, and wails like the little bitch that he is. “P-please... don’t... don’t k-kill me...!” he sobs.

For what he put Emma through, for what he made me put her through, I should fucking slaughter him right here, in the place where he signed his own

death warrant. But that would be too easy.

Death is too fucking good for this bastard.

I've changed my mind on the fate of Remmy Jefferson. I don't want to execute him here and now; I want him to live the rest of his days, never knowing which one will be the last. I want him to look over his shoulder every time he steps out of his house, never knowing which shadow will be the one that swallows him up for good. I want fear to be the only thing he can taste. I want him never to sleep again.

Or at least, that's what I've decided now. Who knows? I might change my mind again in the next minute or so.

"Listen closely, you useless little cockroach. You come within two states of Emma or those children ever again and I will kill you with my bare hands. I'll do it in public, too, in broad daylight just to prove that I can. You hear me?"

He nods fast. There's hope in his agreement. The desperate need to believe that, even though he might have lost everything else, he gets to keep his life.

"Good. Now, get out of my fucking sight."

He scrambles onto his hands and knees and crawls to the door. He uses the handle to pull himself back up and then he rushes out without a backward glance.

Before the door closes on him, Kirill slips in. "You let him *live*?" he exclaims incredulously as he turns to listen to the sound of Remmy fleeing.

"After what he did to Emma?" I bare my teeth. "No fucking way. I'm just giving him a head start. Send a team after him tomorrow."

Kirill gives me a satisfied nod. "'After what he did to Emma,' huh? That's the cardinal sin? You know, that's something she might like to hear."

I take a deep breath. "After everything I said to her, after how I've treated her, it will take a lot more than that to fix things between us." I crack my knuckles and sigh. "But I'm willing to do whatever it takes."

Kirill smiles with palpable relief. "Fucking *finally*."

EMMA

The kids have just gone down to the gardens with Amelia when I notice the message on my lockscreen.

RUSLAN: *Be outside in 5 minutes.*

It was sent three minutes ago. Which means I have two minutes to get my ass outside.

Except *why*? His message is just as informative as he has been lately and it's making me nervous. Not just because this is the first time in weeks that he's deigned to text me at all; it's also the first contact between us since I word-vomited my confession all over him yesterday. Since then—radio silence.

Until this ominous five-word text.

Is he working off some sort of guidebook I'm not aware of? **Intrigue and suspense building: how to bring the drama. Chapter 5 in *A Pahkan's Guide to Intimidation and World Domination.***

His Range Rover is zooming up the drive as I walk down the steps. He whips a full turn and stops just in front of me, inch-perfect. He leans over and pushes the door open.

I get in hoping he'll fill me in, but no explanation seems forthcoming as he immediately shifts back into drive and we take off again. I figure he'll explain when he's ready. But after ten minutes, he's as silent as the night. And he looks about as friendly.

“Ruslan?” His eyes flicker in my direction and then back to the road. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

I’m halfway between a scared gulp and an annoyed scowl. This is all happening in a week where I’m supposed to be especially mindful of my blood pressure. But I can feel the stress sweats coming on. It always starts at the palms.

He turns the corner and I frown. This is my neighborhood. Or at least, it used to be.

“Are you taking me back to the apartment?”

“Yes.”

Okay, breathe. Breathe. Remember to stay calm for the baby. Think about your freaking blood pressure! Of course, all that does is make me sweat more. Somehow, I don’t think additional sweat will help.

I glance towards Ruslan, who remains uninterested in looking at me. Is it because he’s done? He didn’t buy my explanation and now, he just wants to get rid of me? He’s gonna drop me off with Ben and let him finish me off? I’m gonna lose custody of my kids anyway?

What is happening?

Blood pressure!

It’s a really fucked-up version of *He loves me, he loves me not*.

I’m spiraling but I have no idea how to turn my mind off or my heartbeat down. “Ruslan,” I say, swallowing hard, “you’re making a huge mistake.”

“No, I’m not,” he replies, completely stone-cold. “I’m fixing one.”

Maybe I could open the door and kind of cannonball my way out of this car? I glance towards the speedometer. He’s doing a casual eighty. Yeah, that’s definitely gonna kill me.

What if I just leap out and run the moment he stops driving? I bite my bottom lip, knowing full well that that would end terribly. I’ve never been the fastest

runner. I joined track because Sienna joined track. After a couple of training sessions, the coach told me that I should consider going out for theater instead.

By the time he parks outside my Hell's Kitchen apartment, I'm no longer surprised. I'm strangely resigned. Maybe it's time to accept my fate. I'm not meant to be the guardian of those kids. It seems the universe is unequivocally opposed to it.

"Come on," Ruslan orders once we're parked.

I don't even try to run. I just slink after him into the building and up to the fourth floor. I can hear Ben pattering around in there. My skin crawls at the thought of seeing him again.

Ruslan is about to knock when I stop him with a hand to his arm. "Wait!" He glances at me impassively. "What about the kids?"

He frowns. "The kids are fine."

"You'll look after them?"

His frown gets the tiniest bit deeper. "Of course I will. You don't ever have to worry about them again."

That's good to know. I suppose there's nothing left to do but to worry about myself now. I swallow my tears as Ruslan knocks on the door.

Ben's footsteps thump closer. He rips the door open wide before realizing who's standing there waiting for him. When he does, his jaw flops wide open.

"What the fuck?"

Yeah. My thoughts exactly.

Then Ruslan slams his forehead right into Ben's face, sending him keeling backwards. If the coffee table had still been standing, he would have broken through the glass the same way I had.

I'm so shocked that not even a gasp escapes my lips. I just stand there, frozen to the threshold as Ben splutters up blood and half-formed expletives from

where he lands.

Ruslan grips my wrist and pulls me into the apartment. The door slams shut behind us and he turns back to Ben, who's still lying in a daze in the middle of the stained carpet. There's a pungent stink that clings to the walls. I'm not surprised: Ben was never much of a housekeeper, even back in the ancient days when he was a half-decent father.

“What kind of person, what kind of *man*, sells out the woman who's been taking care of his children?” Ruslan growls as he circles Ben like a predator about to strike.

My jaw is hanging open.

Did I hear what I think I just heard?

“You saw how hard she worked for you and those kids. You saw how well she looked after them. And instead of being grateful, you decided to take fucking advantage. You joined forces with that lowlife piece of shit who masquerades as a reporter and you decided to put yourself first. Did you even think for a second about your children?”

Ben's still gawking up at Ruslan with blood pouring out of both nostrils. He looks like what he is: a man who's just realized far, far too late that he overplayed his hand and lost.

“No. No, of course you didn't think about your children. You didn't think about Josh when you were threatening the boy with violence, making him lie and steal for you. Why would you think of any of them now?”

Ben's eyes veer to me. “E-Emma—”

Ruslan lunges between us. “Don't you dare. Don't you *dare* fucking look at her. Not after how you betrayed her.”

I'm shivering from the weight of all this unexpected emotion. From the realization of what's actually happening, too.

Ruslan didn't bring me here to abandon me to Ben.

He brought me here for justice.

Then, while my brain is still reeling, Ruslan pulls out a stack of clean white papers and throws them onto the carpet next to Ben. “Try not to get blood on those when you sign them.”

Ben glances down distractedly. Then his eyes catch on the words. “T-these are custody papers.”

“Oh, how wonderful—it can read,” Ruslan snarls sarcastically. “Once you sign those papers, legal and physical custody will pass from you to Emma.”

He shakes his head. “If I do that... I-I’ll lose them...”

“You mean you’ll lose your bargaining power? You’ll lose control of Emma? Without those children, you can’t make her take your shit. That’s what you’re really afraid of losing, aren’t you?”

Ben turns to me again, his eyes bright with pitiful tears. His nose is still gushing blood and snot, but he doesn’t even seem to notice.

“Em, listen to me. I know I haven’t been the best father or b-brother to you —”

“I warned you not to do that,” Ruslan rumbles.

Ben continues as though Ruslan hadn’t spoken. “—but I-I’m just so fucking miserable all the time. Without her, without my Sienna, nothing seems worth it. She was my everything. She was my whole fucking world. P-please... don’t let him do this...”

I can understand why he’s going with this strategy. It’s worked for him in the past. In the months after Si’s death, I’d done my best to care for him. *It’s a phase*, I thought. *It’ll pass*, I thought. But as the months went by and Ben just kept getting worse and worse, I realized that he wasn’t just using me; he was using Sienna, too.

He was using her death as an excuse to let himself go, to stop trying, to stop caring.

I could have forgiven him if it was just me. But I can’t forgive him for what he’s cost those children. I won’t forgive him for what he’s put them through.

“I gave you so many chances, Ben,” I say softly. “I begged you to be better

for those kids. You keep using Sienna as an excuse, but the truth is, if she were here right now, she'd be so damn ashamed of you."

His face crumples up and he looks away. He doesn't look at either one of us when he speaks again. "Y-you can't make me sign those papers."

I close my eyes. *Oh no, Ben. You shouldn't have said that.*

When I open them again, I see Ruslan squatting so he's eye level with Ben. "Let me be very clear. You have two choices here: sign and you get to live. Refuse? You die and we get the kids anyway."

I do a confused double-take. *Did he just say "we"?*

Ben sneers, blood crusting around his upper lip. "Why let me live at all?"

Ruslan shrugs. "Because I don't want to be responsible for taking away their last living parent. Even if he is a worthless piece of shit."

Tears pool in my eyes. I know exactly what it means for someone like Ruslan to walk away from a man like Ben without exacting his pound of flesh. The only reason Ben is being given a choice at all is because of how much Ruslan loves those kids.

"Fine," he spits at last. "I'll sign."

Ruslan flings a pen at him and I watch with bated breath as Ben scribbles on the dotted line. Once he's signed the last page, I wait for the relief to hit, but still—nothing.

It hasn't quite sunk in yet.

Ruslan picks up the papers and folds them closed. "Just a little parting advice: the moment you wake up, I'd start looking for another state to move to. I don't ever want to see you again."

Ben's eyebrows knit together. "W-wake up?"

This time, I'm expecting the blow. Ruslan's right arm swings forward and makes violent contact with the side of Ben's temple. Ben's eyes roll back and his body goes limp.

He looks oddly fake like this. Not a person anymore. Not a part of my life.

If I ever see him again, he'll be a stranger.

Ruslan rises back to his feet and stretches. "He should come to in a few hours, don't worry."

I frown. I'm not worried. Not about Ben, anyway.

"Come on," he says, holding out a hand. "Let's go home."

Let's go home. What a sentence. Still dazed, I take Ruslan's hand and follow him back into his SUV, trying to process everything that just happened.

Are the kids really mine? After all this time, I finally get them all to myself without the burden of having to deal with Ben?

It feels surreal. It feels too good to be true.

I sneak a glance at Ruslan as we drive back to the estate. He hasn't said a word. But... all that back there—it has to mean he believes me now, right?

Somehow, I can't bring myself to ask.

Because every time I feel like I'm on solid ground with Ruslan, something happens that reminds me that it's all just shifting quicksand that's just pretending to be concrete. It's only real for a moment—then reality drags me further down.

The moment we get back to the house, I run upstairs to check on the kids. All three are tucked in their beds, sleeping peacefully. I back out of Josh's room and collide with Ruslan. His hands shoot out and grab me, twisting me around to face him.

"You okay?"

He asks the question softly, like he truly cares about the answer.

I open my mouth but only a sob comes out. "Sorry," I croak before I turn tail and run into my bedroom.

He follows me in there. The moonlight coming through the window casts everything in a fake-looking silvery glow. If this ends up being nothing but a very realistic dream, I'm gonna be *pissed* tomorrow.

But even when I blink, even when I pinch myself, it doesn't go away.

It stays.

I stay.

He stays.

I drop to a seat at the edge of my bed and try to breathe deeply. I need to trust what just happened. I saw Ben sign those papers with my own two eyes.

“Emma.”

I look up and Ruslan is standing in front of me. Before I can think of something to say, he's kneeling down.

“I made a mistake, Emma,” he says gently. “I should never have believed that you were capable of betraying me. I should have trusted my instincts.”

I feel strangely numb. *How long have I waited for him to say these exact words?*

“Then why didn't you?”

Those amber eyes are burning with intensity. “Because you always felt too good to be true. I was terrified from the beginning that I would lose you. I suppose, when Kirill came to me with the news that Remmy had gotten his hands on our contract, it was like a self-fulfilling prophecy coming to life. I was so scared of losing you that I told myself it was easier if I was the one who pushed you away first.” He clears his throat, eyes falling down for a moment. Then he drags them back up to meet mine. “I can't change the past, Emma. All I can do now is make it up to you.”

My breath is pinned in my throat. “How do you plan on doing that?”

“By giving you my time and attention, to start with. By showing you with time and patience just how important you are to me. And, for right now, with an orgasm or five. For as long as you want it.”

My heart flutters and suddenly, I'm not numb anymore. In fact, there's a whole lot going on right now and it's emanating from my nether regions.

Focus, Emma. Don't let your vagina think she's in charge.

I meet his scorching gaze. “I don’t want this to be just sex anymore, Ruslan.”

He doesn’t flinch away from those words. “It’s so, so much more than that.” He takes my hand and pulls it to his lips. He kisses my knuckles gently and looks at me with a smile that makes my insides turn to putty. “Let me prove it.”

How can I say no to that?

EMMA

He really does want to make it up to me.

That's the last coherent thought in my head as Ruslan starts to eat me out, his tongue slowly sucking away the tension in my spine and the wariness in my heart.

He's got his hands on the backs of my thighs as my legs rest on his shoulders. I spend the next five minutes on the very cusp of a drool-worthy orgasm, but every time I'm close, he keeps pulling back, teasing me with the promise of all the pleasure he's about to unleash on me.

It doesn't take long before I'm nothing more than a quivering mess of nerve endings. But my sensitivity doesn't just begin and end with my body. I'm on the verge of tears, too. The last few months come to me in short bursts.

Our first real kiss.

The first time we slept together, how *nervous* I was. How he stripped away my clothes, then my fears. *What a good girl you are. Spread your legs for me. Now—touch yourself.*

The night I realized I wasn't his date, that that privilege belonged to Jessica Allens.

When I woke up in the hospital and he was right there with me. All the unpleasantness that followed...

None of it changed how I felt about him. He was still the man who saved me

from being Ben's puppet and my parent's stooge. He gave Josh new confidence and fresh hope and showed him how to be something besides just another angry, broken man with no outlet for his pain. He showed the girls what it's like to have a strong male figure ever-present in their lives. Thanks to him, both Caroline and Reagan will pick men worth their time instead of trying to correct past traumas by pursuing hollow carbon copies of their fucked-up father.

He's the savior I never dreamed of asking for.

He's also the cause of so much of the pain and trauma he saved me from.

But how do you separate those things? One flows into the other and then back into itself. He's not all good and he's not all evil. He's something in between. Superhero and flawed human all in one.

And now, he's mine.

All mine.

Just like I've been his from the start.

His tongue glides over my clit and I gasp, my body twitching with pleasure. "Ruslan..." I moan. "I can't... *ahh...*"

He keeps stroking my clit with his tongue until I feel the orgasm finally take over, roaring through me until it shrouds my body in warmth.

"That's it, my little *kiska*. Let go. Just fucking let go."

I want to. *God*, I so badly want to. But letting go isn't that easy for me anymore. *Quicksand imitating concrete is still not concrete.*

I blink and his face hovers over me, those scorching amber eyes clearer than I've ever seen them.

"You're crying," he whispers.

I touch my face and discover that he's right. Tears wet my cheeks and I'm too tired, too spent to wipe them away. So Ruslan kisses them off my face, making me shudder with new desire.

"Why are you crying?" he asks gently when he's swallowed my tears.

I give him the honest answer. “I don’t know.”

We’re lying in the comfort of my bed, skin to skin, nothing between us. His cock is pressed between my legs, nestled gently against my pussy. He’s hard as rock but his erection isn’t demanding.

“Yes, you do. You’re just afraid to say it out loud.”

I hate that he knows me that well. “H-how can I trust this?” I whisper.

“How can you trust *me*, you mean?” His finger does slow circles on my naked abdomen. “It won’t happen overnight. It’ll take time.” He keeps kissing my neck. And my ears. And my face. And my breasts. It makes it very hard to pay attention to what he’s saying between the kisses. “It’ll take months of orgasms. Months of romantic dinners and expensive gifts. Months of nights like this, lying here and talking about everything or nothing at all. Maybe it’ll take years of all those things. And I’m okay with that.”

I almost smile. “I don’t need expensive gifts.”

“You’re gonna get them anyway.”

“You can’t buy me, Mr. Oryolov.”

He lifts his head and looks down at me. I was teasing, but he’s not smiling at all. “I know that,” he says with a fierceness that takes me back. “I’m not trying to buy you; I’m trying to *earn* you.”

“That’s not how you do it.”

I would have thought this conversation would deflate his erection but he’s still hard as ever. Maybe that’s why my pussy is dripping all over his tip.

“Then tell me how.”

“By *being* with me. By *talking* to me. By making me your equal partner.”

His lips follow my collarbone down to my breast. He circles the nipple with his tongue and sucks on it delicately. “I’ve never had an equal partner in my life. But I’m willing to learn how.”

Excitement spreads through my chest. I feel hot and cold at the same time. “Really?”

“Really.” He pulls himself up a little and pushes my legs open a little wider. His cock slides up and down my slit. I’m so wet that his head slides in easily.

I moan. “Ruslan...”

“Any other demands before we forget how to talk, my little *kiska*?”

He’s still not all the way inside me and yet I can’t focus on a damn thing but the feeling of him between my legs. I want him deep—I want him to fill me up until I lose myself in him. I’m writhing around beneath him so much, trying to force him inside me, that he pulls out completely.

“We’re having an important conversation,” he scolds, like *I’m* the one doing all the teasing.

I grit my teeth. There is it again—*emotional quicksand*.

“I-I... *ahh*... can’t think...”

His tongue slides around my earlobe. Around and in and over. “What do you want?” he rasps.

Unexpected words fly out of my mouth before I can stop them. “I want to be your dirty little whore.”

He chuckles and that sound alone makes me decide that this is exactly the point I want to make. Because right now, all that matters is his cock at my pussy and his lips on my skin.

“My dirty little whore, hm?” he growls, grinding his cock back against my slit. He’s still not all the way in, though. He’s driving me crazy on purpose.

I bite down on my bottom lip. “Mm-*hm*...”

“I knew exactly what you would be to me from the moment I heard that accidental voicemail you left me.” I’m so lost in desire that I don’t even blush. “I heard your hungry moans, your desperate little gasps, and I knew from that moment on exactly what you were.”

“*Ahh*... W-what... what was I?”

“*Mine*,” he growls. “All. Fucking. Mine.”

Then he thrusts inside me all at once. I cry out, spasming in every direction as his arm slides around my body to pin me close to him. He fucks me hard, slamming his hips into mine so hard that the sound reverberates around the room.

My fists bunch up the bedsheets. My eyes roll back inside my head. He's relentless and all-consuming and it's all I want.

I just want to feel like he's real.

Especially when he starts fucking me even harder, wringing a second orgasm from me until my body goes limp with exhaustion. He rolls me over so that I'm lying face down on his chest. His fingers run down my spine again, dragging little pathways through my sweaty back.

"I'm happy to tease you, Emma." His tone is so serious that I have no choice but to pay attention. "I'm happy for you to be my whore and my slut in bed. But that's where it ends."

Goosebumps erupt over my skin. *Where is this going?*

"Outside of this bed, outside of my cock in your cunt, you are my *woman*. My queen. And I'm going to take care of you as such. I'm going to spoil you and I'm going to protect you. That goes for the kids, too. You, them—you all belong to me now, Emma Carson. And if you ever leave, I will just drag you back here. I will drag you back into my house and my bed because this is where you fucking belong."

My heart is thrumming so fast and pounding so loud in my ears that I'm afraid I'm gonna miss something.

"You are *mine*," he says again, hands hard on my hips. "You're not going anywhere. And neither am I."

I just kiss his chest.

There's nothing else that needs to be said.

RUSLAN

COMPARTMENTALIZING.

That's what helped me acclimatize to my role as *pakhan*. It helped to keep work out of my home. Made things simpler. More focused.

And yet here I am, bringing my work home.

Because it means I'm just a call away if the kids need me. Emma can just walk right in whenever she feels a little lonely.

Not that she has. Since we slept together two nights ago in what she likes to call the beginning of my redemption tour, she hasn't sought me out once. Maybe she's just testing me, checking to see if I'll keep going to her.

If that's all it takes to convince her I'm in this for the long haul, I'm willing to make the first move for as long as it takes. Day after day, week after week, year after, I'll find her and hold her close and remind her that she's mine.

"Yo," Kirill greets when he walks in smelling of cigar smoke. "Just wanted to let you know: the team's on Remmy's tail. They should complete the job today."

I nod. "Tell me when they have a body."

"Will do, boss."

"Any news from the Bane board meeting?" I ask.

"Vadim was shocked that you weren't there. In fact, he was shocked that you're working from home in the first place." Kirill gives me a playful smirk.

“To be honest, so am I.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s just easier this way.”

“Easy access, you mean.”

I throw him a glare. “Did you get your hands on a sample of Sopernik?” I ask, pivoting without the least bit of subtlety.

Kirill’s smile drops immediately. “That’s what I came here to talk to you about.”

Fuck.

“Let me guess—it’s a match for Venera?”

He nods. “It’s a perfect match. Adrik definitely ripped you off.”

“I’m *shocked*,” I drawl sarcastically.

“That’s not all.”

I clench my jaw. “Go on.”

“He’s basically copying your rollout plan to a T, also. Sopernik is going to be circulating in his club exclusively. The crowd is going to be invite-only and there’s gonna be extra security casing the place throughout the night.”

“That little *mudak*...” I rake a hand through my hair. “What about the house Sergey was found in? Do we have an ID on who owns it?”

“That’s the weird part. It definitely has an owner. The problem is that, at this point, the owner seems to be untraceable.”

I frown. It’s odd for Kirill not to be able to chase down loose ends like that.

“Does it matter?” he asks, studying my face closely. “We already know that Adrik is behind this. Who gives a damn which stooge he set up as a front man?”

“Exactly. He’s been obvious about his involvement in this steal,” I point out. “Which means he *wants* me to know it’s him. He *wants* the credit for this. So why try to hide the fact that he owns that house?”

Kirill shrugs. “Who knows what that little shit has up his sleeve?”

I shake my head. “Something’s not right about this. There’s a missing piece we’re overlooking. Why hide that bit of information? Unless...”

I drift off, caught in the half-formed puzzle in my head.

“Ruslan?”

I clear my throat. “Unless there’s someone else involved. Someone who *doesn’t* want credit for any of this.”

Kirill doesn’t look overly concerned. “You’re the most powerful man in the city. It makes sense that you would have enemies you’re not even aware of. Maybe Adrik’s just aligned with one of them?”

“It’s possible,” I mutter. But instinct is telling me that this faceless second enemy is no unknown entity.

“You did piss off Jessica Allens and her douchebaggery father.”

“That’s possible, too.”

“I say fuck ‘em all.” Kirill crosses his legs. “I think we need to focus on Adrik and this upcoming rollout of Sopernik. Perhaps even return fire with fire?”

“For one, he’s going to be expecting that. You said it yourself: he’s planning for increased security around the club. Also, I’m not about to murder innocent civilians just to fuck up his launch.”

“Sometimes, casualties are inevitable.”

“Under most circumstances,” I muse, “I’d be inclined to agree. But in this case, it’s neither necessary nor inevitable. The only lives I’m going to be taking are the ones who are directly involved in this whole scheme.”

Kirill raises his eyebrows.

“What?” I demand impatiently. “What’s that look for?”

“Nothing,” he mutters. “It’s just... you sounded like your father just then.”

A few years ago, a comment like that would've pissed me off. But now? I can appreciate my father's temperate nature. I can admire his penchant for self-restraint and mercy. Even when all his advisers, including Vadim, were pushing him to stoke fires, he usually stayed calm long enough to put them out.

As a young man, I thought he was weak.

But perhaps what I mistook for weakness all this time was nothing less than hard-earned wisdom.

"I'll find another way to deal with Adrik. His days are numbered."

Kirill nods with satisfaction. "I'll be counting them down."

The door opens and I notice Emma's profile before she stops short, catching sight of Kirill. She fidgets self-consciously and starts to retreat back out of the office. "I'm sorry; I should have knocked. I'll come back la—"

"It's okay, Emma," Kirill interrupts quickly. "I was just leaving."

He tosses me a quick wink and waltzes for the door. Emma lingers there tentatively, looking between the two of us.

I meet her eyes. "Come in, Emma."

She hesitates for only a moment before she closes the door and walks into my office. She sought me out this time. *That's a step in the right direction.*

"I'm sorry..."

"For what?"

She picks at her lip. "For disturbing you."

I shake my head. "You're not."

The vein on her forehead is throbbing gently. "I, um... I don't have a reason for being here. I just... well... I was lonely and I just thought... *God—*" She cringes. "This was dumb. I shouldn't have come."

She's turning for the door when I lunge out of my chair and catch her after three long strides. "You're not going anywhere, *kiska.*"

“You’re busy.”

“I’d rather be busy with you.”

Her cheeks flush with color. *My God, she’s stunning.* My cock is in full agreement. I pull her to me and graze her lips against mine, sucking on their sweetness until she’s breathless and melting in my arms.

“Ruslan...” She puts her hands on my chest and pushes gently, just enough to make me stop pawing her. “I didn’t come here for this.”

I drop my hands immediately, which fucking kills me, but I do it anyway. “Okay. We can do whatever else you want to do.”

She raises her eyebrows skeptically. “Even if it’s just... talking?”

“Especially if it’s just talking.”

“Or just... cuddling?”

“*Especially* if it’s just cuddling.”

Her eyebrows pull together. She actually looks a little... annoyed? Am I reading that right? “Dammit,” she snaps. “You always do this.” Then she launches herself at me, kissing me desperately, her hands clawing at the front of my shirt.

Laughing, I lift her into my arms and carry her over to the sofa. I drop down onto it, positioning her on my lap with my hands on her hips. She rips into my shirt, tearing it off and exploring my abs with her fingertips. Impatiently, she moves on to my zipper. My cock jumps out at her eagerly and she gives me a coquettish little smile that makes the beast in me adamant to stake its claim.

I rip her panties down her legs first. She sits on my cock and it slides inside her, filling her up with one deep thrust. Her eyes roll back in her head. “*Fuck* yeah.”

I slap her ass and away she goes, riding me furiously. I pull at the buttons of her blouse until I can see her tits bounce in my face. I watch them, mesmerized at their fullness, their pert enthusiasm.

Mine.

All fucking mine.

I pull a nipple into my mouth and suck on it while she rides me. Her hips jerk back and forth as her body erupts with goosebumps. She cranes her neck backwards and moans loudly like she doesn't care who the fuck hears.

“Ahh... Ruslan...”

She comes with my name on her lips and if her orgasm didn't do it, *that* certainly does. I explode inside her, filling her to the brim. She jerks her hips back and forth tiredly—once, twice—and then she collapses against my chest.

It takes a while for her breathing to slow down. I just hold her until it does.

“I *really* didn't come here for this,” she mumbles self-consciously, hiding her face in my shoulder.

I chuckle. “I don't care what you came for, just as long as you came.”

She smiles and plays with my hair. It's curling at the back just a little. I'm probably due for a haircut sometime soon.

Ring, ring, ring.

I glare at the unwelcome intrusion my phone presents. But when I notice it's Kirill, I grab it. “Yeah?”

“Just wanted to let you know it's done. We have a body.”

I grin with violent satisfaction. “Good.”

When I hang up, Emma is staring at me curiously, but she doesn't ask what that was about. Probably because she assumes I wouldn't tell her.

“That was Kirill,” I explain. “He wanted to let me know that any remaining threat Remmy might've posed to you and the kids is gone now.”

She raises her eyebrows. “H-how?”

“For one, I bought the newspaper that Remmy worked for just so that I could

squash the story he wrote about us.”

Her jaw snaps open. “That must have cost you a fortune.”

I shrug. “Luckily, I have several of those to spare.”

“B-but... Remmy can always go to other newspapers and sell the story there. Or print an anonymous thing, like a letter to the editor or whatever. Or even just publish online—”

“He won’t be writing, printing, or publishing anything else.”

The vein in her forehead is jumping erratically now. “Y-you mean... do you mean that he’s—”

I don’t pull any punches. “He’s dead, Emma.”

She pales. For a moment, I wonder if perhaps there’s such a thing as too much honesty. After all, she is still not familiar with the inner workings of my world. She might object on moral grounds even if she believes Remmy deserved what he got.

Her face gets solemn and tight. “Why did you tell me that?”

“Because I want you to be my equal partner.” I hold her face between my hands. “I don’t want to have to hide these things from you, Emma. If you don’t want to know, then I won’t tell you. But if you do... then everything is yours. The good, the bad, and the ugly. All of it.”

She entwines her fingers with mine and gives me a tentative glance. “Thank you... for telling me all that.”

“I told you: I’m going to keep you and the kids safe. This is for the long haul.”

Her forehead vein is back, twitching, a tiny little voice of doubt she can’t quite shake off yet. But that’s okay. Trust takes time.

And I’m willing to give this as much time as it needs.

EMMA

“‘Emergency custody hearing’?” Isabel Costa’s face doesn’t change when I echo her words back to her. “What on earth does that mean?”

I’m hoping that she doesn’t take my tone personally. I’m not shouting *at* her; more like, I’m shouting *around* her.

She purses her lips. “It seems your parents have decided to push the hearing forward after discovering that your brother-in-law has skipped town. They want to sue for custody.”

I jump to my feet and shove the papers away from me. “*I* have custody of those kids. Ben signed away his rights to *me*.”

Isabel adjusts her green-rimmed glasses and nods. “It may be that your parents are unaware of that. Or maybe they just don’t care. Either way, we will need to attend this hearing so that we can clear things up.”

I’m hearing footsteps down the hall, coming towards the living room. “Be straight with me, Isabel. Do I stand a chance of losing custody of the kids? Even with Ben’s signed consent?”

“It’s highly unlikely—”

My heart stops for a beat. “‘*Highly unlikely*’? That implies that there’s a chance of a yes!”

“There’s no chance,” Ruslan snarls as he storms into the living room. “Not a fucking chance in hell they’re taking those kids away from you.”

Isabel looks extremely uncomfortable. “Ruslan... I’m not sure giving Emma guarantees is necessarily the best idea. We need to be realistic. The fact is that Emma is young. She’s also struggled with providing for the children in past years. If her parents can make the case that she’s an unfit guardian, then —”

“Isabel.” Ruslan’s voice is clipped and blunt and leaves absolutely no room for argument. “We are not losing custody of those kids. When’s the hearing?”

She sighs and picks up the papers I want nothing to do with. “Three days from now.”

Ruslan nods. “We’ll be ready.”

Honestly, I’m *this* close to bursting into tears. The only thing that stops me is Ruslan. When he hears my terrified snuffle, he grabs both my hands and forces me to face him. “Emma, look at me.”

I can’t bring myself to do it, though. I just shake my head and stare at the floor as I do my damndest not to picture how it would feel to have the kids ripped away from me. “I thought this was over.”

He squeezes my hands hard. “It will be soon. I didn’t expect your parents to be quite so stubborn—but unfortunately for them, I’m the definition of the fucking word. You have nothing to worry about. They’re not getting their hands on those kids.”

I finally look up at him, willing myself to have the kind of confidence he seems to have been born with. “But—”

“No buts,” he interrupts firmly. “We’re going to go to this hearing and you’re going to show your parents exactly what you’re made of.”

My bottom lip trembles as he pulls me into the circle of his arms. It’s hard to believe anything can go wrong when he’s holding me like this.

“I’m gonna be with you every step of the way, okay?” he murmurs, his voice a rumble that reverberates through me.

I nod against his chest.

There’s nothing else I can do but trust him.



I've been trying to breathe for the past half an hour, but the oxygen seems to be getting stuck somewhere north of my lungs. Air passes my lips, but my body feels starved and desperate for more, more, more of it.

That probably has a little something to do with the fact that my parents are sitting on the bench opposite me with their fancy ass lawyer at their side. They both look ridiculous. Barrett in his tweed blazer and his oversized Hublot. Mom in her silk blouse and mink stole.

"I think we missed the memo to wear our finest chinchilla furs," Ruslan whispers to me in a sarcastic aside.

I suppress a smile and glance at the well-dressed woman sitting next to my mother. "Their lawyer is supposed to be one of the best."

Ruslan snorts. "If she was one of the best, she'd be on *my* payroll."

"How can you be so confident?"

"Because we have this in the bag."

I wish his confidence was catching; I could really use some right now.

Judge Kennedy clears her throat and bangs on the gavel. "Today's docket concerns a custody dispute over the placement of three minor children—Joshua, Reagan, and Caroline Ziegler. Mr. and Mrs. Carson, you're petitioning the court for custody of said minors to be taken from their current guardian—your daughter, Miss Emma Carson—and transferred to you. Do I have that information right?"

Beatrice gets to her feet. "Yes, your honor."

The judge scrutinizes my mother through her long eyelashes. "There's no need to stand when you reply, Mrs. Carson."

"I understand, your honor." Of course, she stands when she says that, too, so it's anyone's guess what she understands.

The judge frowns and turns her attention down to the custody documentation

that Isabel handed her when we walked in.

“Hm. The problem is, the paternal father of the children has signed over his rights to your daughter,” Judge Kennedy acknowledges.

Beatrice looks towards her lawyer. I can only imagine how much she cost. The Dolce power suit she’s wearing screams, *I make my living by fleecing wealthy clients without a leg to stand on.*

With a sigh, the lawyer gets to her feet, adjusting her jacket along the way. “Your honor, if I may, my clients were only recently made aware of the transfer of parental rights—”

“That’s not really the court’s problem now, is it, Ms. Danes?”

Ms. Danes clears her throat. “My clients are adamant that the decision made by their son-in-law was illegitimate. In fact, they feel that coercion was involved in his decision.”

Okay, not totally off the mark there...

I glance at Ruslan, who couldn’t be more relaxed. If you blurred out the background, you’d think he was on a beach somewhere, drinking piña coladas and soaking up tropical sun. Not standing in this bleak courtroom with the fate of my sister’s children on the line.

“Can they prove it?”

“Not as such, necessarily, no.” Ms. Danes clears her throat. “In addition, however, my clients feel that Ms. Carson is ill-equipped to take care of all three children. She lacks the resources and the maturity to fully meet all their needs.”

My jaw flops open. Neither of my parents will look at me, but I can feel their attention aimed in my direction. I want to knock their smug heads together.

Judge Kennedy purses her lips. “And yet Ms. Carson is the one who has been meeting their needs consistently for the past three years.”

“*Thank you!*” Every single pair of eyes in the courtroom turns to me. I blush scarlet. “Sorry,” I murmur. “That was supposed to be an inside thought.”

The judge doesn't crack a smile but she doesn't admonish me, either. Her gaze veers back to my parents and their lawyer. "It's not in the best interests of those children to be removed from a familiar environment and placed in your care, even if you are their grandparents."

Beatrice jerks up to her feet again. "They're not even in school! She pulled them out *months* ago. I checked with their principal!" Her lawyer grabs her arm and whispers something in her ear but Beatrice just shakes her off. "I want what's best for my grandchildren and I'm terrified that my wayward, irresponsible daughter will do more damage of an unfixable variety if they're left with her in the long run."

The judge twists her dark gaze back to me. "Ms. Carson, am I to understand that you pulled those children out of their school without finding an alternate option for them?"

Oh God. Oh God. Oh God.

Isabel gets to her feet before I can fumble for some half-assed explanation. "Of course not, your honor. My client has indeed secured an alternate option for the children."

Ruslan pulls out a sheaf of papers and hands them to Isabel, who walks them over to the judge. I sidle a little closer to Ruslan. "What's going on?"

"I've enrolled the kids at Horace Mann."

My skin tingles. Everyone in the city has heard of Horace Mann. It's where pop stars and presidents send their kids. The tuition for one semester alone is over thirty thousand dollars. But, if I'm being honest, I'm less annoyed about that and more annoyed about the fact that this is the first I'm hearing of any of this.

He's gonna get an earful about this later.

"Well... everything seems to be in order," Judge Kennedy says, turning over the papers to read through everything. "It seems your daughter hasn't neglected the children's education at all, Mrs. Carson."

My mother is gawking at Ruslan and I now with a disbelieving expression. "B-but... she can only enroll them there because of *him*."

Judge Kennedy sighs and turns to Ruslan. “And who are you, Mr...?”

“Oryolov, your honor. Ruslan Oryolov.” He’s the only one who doesn’t look on edge right now.

“And who are you to these children?”

“I’m Ms. Carson’s partner.” He crosses his hands in front of his belt. “And I’m fully committed to helping her raise those three children. I already think of them as my own.”

My jaw flops open again, but for a very different reason this time. Okay, so it’s a *little* harder to be pissed at him about the whole school enrollment thing. Sue me.

The judge fixes him with her eagle eyed gaze. “Taking on three children is no easy feat, Mr. Oryolov.”

Ruslan doesn’t hesitate. “I’m well aware, your honor. It’s a great responsibility, but it’s also a rewarding one. And I’m more than up for the challenge.”

Judge Kennedy nods. “Then there’s nothing further to discuss. Mr. and Mrs. Carson, your petition for custody has been denied. Legal and physical custody of the minor children—Joshua, Reagan, and Caroline Ziegler—will remain with their aunt.”

She bangs the gavel—and just like that, I can breathe again.

EMMA

“Is this real?”

Isabel gives me a reassuring smile. “It’s real. Those papers that Ben signed are ironclad. I made sure of it.”

Ruslan has his hand on the small of my back but his eyes are trained on the other side of the courtroom where my parents are standing with their lawyer. It looks like there’s one hell of a discussion going. All furtive whispers and angry half-glances in our direction.

My first instinct is relief. Then a petty sense of satisfaction. *I won*. I fucking won. I can’t be that bad of a guardian if a judge has decided that it’s in the children’s best interests to stay with me.

Take that, Mom and Dad.

Of course, on the heels of that less-than-gracious thought is guilt. They *are* still my parents and they’re the only family I have left.

“Emma.” My gaze veers to Ruslan, who’s looking at me with a warning in his eyes. “There’s no point.”

I’m not sure how to take that. One, because how did he know what I was thinking? And two: surely there’s something there that can be salvaged? Not everything can be so easily written-off, right?

“They’re still my parents.”

“Parents or not, they treat you like shit,” Ruslan reminds me in a cold voice. “And you deserve better than that.”

I’ve made up my mind on one thing, at least: I’m just gonna let the whole *he-enrolled-the-kids-in-a-fancy-schmancy-school-without-consulting-me-first* thing go. The man’s more than made up for it today by helping me keep custody of the kids. For being here with me through it all.

“You’re right. Let’s go.”

I thank Isabel at the exit of the courthouse, but I’ve got one eye on my parents who are now standing at the bottom of the stairs. Leaving Ruslan with Isabel for a moment, I walk down the steps towards them.

Mom spots me first. Her jaw clenches fiercely and she nudges my father so hard that he nearly tumbles over. “Emma,” Beatrice greets in a frigid voice that I remember well from my adolescent years. Sienna used to do an unbelievable impression of it. “Come over to gloat, have you?”

For God’s sake, why do they have to make everything so hard?

“Of course not,” I reply as levelly as I can. “I just came to say that I’m sorry that things ended this way. I’m sorry they got to this point at all.”

My father narrows his eyes at me. “Don’t think we don’t know exactly why the judge sided with you.”

I breathe. In and out, in and out. *Don’t get into a whole thing with them. Don’t stoop to their level.* “Listen, I’m not here to discuss the outcome. I’m just here to say that, if you ever want to see the kids, you’re welcome to. You are their grandparents and they’ve lost enough family members as it is.”

Beatrice’s eyes bug out and the vein in her forehead pops. I’m afraid that’s a feature that I inherited. Always hated that vein.

“Oh, so you’re here to offer us pity visits? Supervised access to our own grandchildren?”

I sigh. “If you two have an agenda where those kids are concerned, then I oppose it. But if you just want to see them, spend some quality time with them... *that* I can get behind.”

“We don’t need any favors from you,” Barrett snarls at me.

“In fact, we don’t need anything at all from you,” Beatrice adds. “Because this is not over, Emma. We’re going to get a new lawyer and we’re going to drag you into court as many times as it takes to get custody of those three child—”

“I’d stick to achievable goals.”

I whirl around to find Ruslan standing on the step behind me. His eyes are trained on my parents and his jaw is set in that firm square that I’ve learned from experience means business.

“Emma is not losing those children,” he continues as he advances toward us and takes up a position at my side. “Not now. Not ever. I will personally see to it that any petition you make to any court in this city is thrown out before it even reaches a judge. Those children are not a victory for you to claim.”

Barrett tries to interrupt but Ruslan just talks over him.

“They need security, love, and safety—and they have that with Emma. She has looked after them as though they’re her own for the past three and a half years. If you cared at all for your grandchildren, you’d see that they’re better off with her.” His voice crackles dangerously. “She is an amazing fucking mother and an amazing fucking person and she doesn’t deserve to be treated this way. So if I *ever* see or hear you utter another bad word to her again, I will make it my personal mission to turn your lives into a living hell.” He looks right at Beatrice. “I understand that you’re a member of several society committees and charities in the city. I will see that you are removed from each and every one.” Then he turns to Barrett. “And as for you, I will not only see to it that you’re kicked out of all your clubs, I will make sure no businessman worth his salt entertains a deal with your firm ever again. You’ll be paupers. I swear it. You want to test me? Go right ahead. It’s your fucking funeral.”

I watch in amazement as both my parents are rendered speechless. But I know that Ruslan’s threat will work. No way are my parents going to risk their position in the Upper East Side’s social scene just to take custody of the kids they don’t even want in the first place.

It would defeat the whole purpose.

“I hope I’ve made myself clear. I don’t think there’s anything else left to be said.” He turns to me. “Emma, shall we?”

I raise my eyebrows as my gaze veers to my parents. There are a hundred things that I want to say to them. *Why couldn’t you both just be normal? Why weren’t we enough for you? Didn’t losing Sienna teach you anything? Didn’t it hurt?*

But I’m starting to realize that sometimes the healthiest thing you can do with certain people is simply to walk away.

I slip my hand into Ruslan’s. “Let’s go home.”

We head off in the direction of his Rolls Royce and I take a deep, staggering breath that feels like it releases a lifetime of pent-up frustration and resentment.

I buckle myself into the passenger’s seat and glance at Ruslan as he turns on the engine. “Thank you,” I say softly. “For having my back.”

He answers by palming the back of my neck, hooking me toward him, and pressing his lips hard against mine. The kiss hits like it’s the first time we’ve ever done it. That sense of build-up, of butterflies, of electricity dancing on your skin. When he finally pulls away, I’m breathless and flushed.

“You’re my woman now, Emma. And no one talks to my woman like that.”

My heart flutters as he places one hand on the steering wheel and the other hand on my thigh. The possessiveness in his touch is as exciting as it is terrifying.

Mostly because it forces me to face what I’m feeling. I’m well past the point of infatuation and lust. This is not a crush that will pass. This is not a friendship that involves sex.

As far as my feelings are concerned, this is the real freaking deal. So, for the first time, I let myself think the thought I’ve kept locked away in a dark corner of my heart for months upon months.

I am completely, madly, desperately in love with Ruslan Oryolov and there’s

not a damn thing I can do about it.

RUSLAN

I don't know what witchcraft she employed, but Emma has somehow managed to convince me that a family boat day is the only appropriate way to celebrate our newfound freedom.

No Ben.

No Remmy.

No Beatrice and Barrett.

It'll be fun, she said. Quality time with the kids, she said. Open ocean, fresh air—it's the break we need, she said.

She even suggested I invite Fyodor and Vadim and somehow, I'd agreed to that too.

Like I said—witchcraft.

Either that or the fact that she was pushing her swollen breasts in my face at the time. Come to think of it, that might also have been a major contributing factor. Then again, every time I look at her body, I can forgive myself for the lapse. Those aren't breasts a man can easily say no to.

We end up on my private yacht far enough into the ocean that we can't see land from any side. Emma comes up next to me on the bow and leans against the stanchion. She's wearing a white cotton dress and when the wind whistles through, it pulls the fabric taut against her growing belly. My cock stirs at the sight of her, curved and beautiful, hair flapping in the breeze.

“Most people don’t get on hundred-foot yachts for a ‘family boat day,’” she accuses with a shy little smile and laugh.

I smirk. “Only the best for my family.”

Her smile softens. “You don’t have to go overboard, you know? Figuratively speaking. The kids and I would have been happy making sandcastles on the beach.”

“And mix with the rabble?” I scoff. “No way. You need to be out here, where only I can see you looking this fucking good.”

She giggles, her gaze drifting slowly towards the main cabin where the children have disappeared to change into their swimsuits. Fyodor and Vadim are lounging on the starboard side, nursing cocktails in near-identical linen suits.

“I like your father,” she murmurs.

I cup the back of her elbow and stroke the skin there softly. “He likes you.”

“How can you tell?”

“He’s smiled more today than he has in the last five years. He lost his smile when he lost my mother and brother. It’s good to see it again.”

Those compassionate eyes of hers fill up with tears. “I can’t imagine what that must have been like for him.” She pauses for a second and sighs. “Actually, I can. There was a time after Sienna’s death that I thought I’d never smile again, either.”

I nod. “Losing anyone you care about is hard. Losing a sibling is harder. You’re supposed to grow old with them, you know?”

She wipes away a tear and places her fingertips on my wrist. “I know.”

“Leonid was supposed to be *pakhan*. But there was no time to mourn him. I was forced to pick myself up and carry on.”

“That’s what happened to me, too. I had to be there for the kids. I didn’t have the luxury of falling apart.”

It’s weird to think I have so much in common with Emma. When she first

walked into my office almost two years ago, she couldn't have seemed more different than me, more alien.

And now...

Now, I can't imagine my life without her.

It's a sobering thought. One that makes me reflect on my father's mental catatonia. Would I have reacted any different if I were to lose Emma or one of those kids? Could I really afford to have judged him when I had no goddamn clue what he had gone through?

Emma's hand is still on my wrist, rubbing it in slow, tender circles. "What was your brother like?"

"What was he like?" I repeat, thinking back as his face flashes before my mind's eye. "He was everything to me when I was a boy. Confident, fierce, charismatic. Protective as hell."

She smiles. "Sounds like someone I know."

I laugh as the salty spray over the bow kisses her cheeks. "I wasn't as confident when I was younger. I certainly wasn't charismatic. And I never had a reason to be protective."

"I don't believe you. But even if I did, I'd say it sounds like you became the person you admired most. That's beautiful, you know. He's still alive in you. You're a memorial to him."

That catches me by surprise. I look down at her and think for the millionth time how beautiful she is to me. She's pure from the roots of her soul to the surface of her sun-kissed skin. I never want to leave this boat, this moment. Her gazing up at me like I made the world for her with my own two hands... It's everything I never knew I needed.

"Aunt Emma! Ruslan!" The kids launch themselves out of the cabin in their swimsuits, excitement pouring off their wide, toothy smiles. Even Josh is grinning from ear to ear. "Let's get in the water! Come on. Come on. Come on!"

I strip off my shirt and gesture for Fyodor and Vadim to join us. The ship

sways gently in the deep ocean current, though the anchor keeps us held in position.

“I want to jump in,” Caro insists when I start to unspool the rope ladder to toss it over the side.

Reagan nods emphatically. “Me, too!”

I pause and regard them. Josh already looks resigned to doing things the safe way, the proper way. Which is why it makes me laugh so much to scowl as seriously as I can, right up to the point that they’re sure I’m going to insist on following the protocols...

Then turn and haul ass toward the bow.

“You’ll have to beat me to it then!” I call over my shoulder. I catch just a glimpse of their shocked, delighted smiles before I launch myself over the edge.

The ocean beckons as I fall, blue and beautiful. Their laughter follows me as I knife down and through the surface. I plummet down, then reverse course and float up to the top. Six smiling faces look down at me. Emma, the kids, my father, my uncle, all slightly confused to see me so carefree.

I don’t blame them; I’m a little confused myself.

But the sun is shining and the water is clear and life has never seemed more perfect.

My grin spreads. “Who’s next?”

Josh jumps in first with a crackling yowl, then Caroline, then Reagan. Vadim begs off a swim, opting for another cocktail on the deck, but Fyodor surprises me by quickly changing into a bathing suit and jumping in after the kids. When was the last time I’d seen him this enthusiastic? This participatory?

“Your turn,” I say to Emma once we’re all bobbing happily in the current. She’s leaning far over the stanchion looking down at us.

She gives me an apologetic smile. “Oh, that’s okay. I think I’m gonna sit this one out.”

I frown. Since when has Emma turned down a chance to swim? The woman is always by the pool in highly distracting swimsuits and bikinis.

“How can you say no to this?” I demand, spreading my arms wide as all of us tread in place. “Just take that dress off and jump in.”

She shakes her head. It’s hard to say from down here with the glare of the sun in my eyes, but I think I see the shadowy furrow of her forehead vein working overtime.

“I think I’m just gonna go inside and rest for a bit.” She disappears before I can ask any further questions.

So much for perfect. Something’s definitely off.

I spend another fifteen minutes with the kids. Then, when Kirill jumps in with them after finishing up some work below deck, I climb up the rope ladder and make my way towards the cabin. I pass Vadim on the outer deck, sipping his cocktail and talking to someone on the phone. Judging by the look on his face, it’s not a pleasant conversation.

I find Emma in her cabin. She’s sitting on the bed in her flowy dress, the slit putting her creamy thigh on full display.

“Ruslan!” she says in surprise, sitting up a little straighter when I walk in. “What are you doing here?”

“I’m here to try and figure out why *you* aren’t out *there*.”

She blushes and tries to avoid my eyes. “It’s nothing.”

“I suggest you tell me now before I carry you back outside and rip that dress right off you myself.”

Her eyes go wide. “You wouldn’t.”

“I would.”

“I’m pregnant.”

“I’ll be gentle when I throw you overboard.”

She throws me a little scowl and gets off the bed in a huff. Unfortunately, her

thigh disappears underneath her skirt.

Easily remedied.

“I’m *embarrassed*, okay?” She stands there with her arms wrapped around her body. “I know it’s silly and superficial but I’m embarrassed.”

“What the hell are you embarrassed about?”

Now, *she’s* the one who looks confused. She gestures to her body. “About *this*.”

“I still have no idea what you’re talking about.”

She groans. “I just don’t like the way I look in my bikini anymore. I put it on underneath this dress and... let’s just say it’s not exactly flattering. So I’m just feeling a little insecure and I’d rather not prance around in a bikini with my stomach on display.”

A scowl twists my lips. I grab her arm and drag her towards the full-length mirror in the corner of the room. Then I rip apart the tie-up that’s holding her dress together.

“Ruslan!” she yelps.

But it’s too late. I’ve already got the damn thing off her. She tries to cover herself up with her arms, but I peel them off and pin them down to her sides. She’s wearing a black string bikini that highlights her breasts and puts her tiny little bump on display. Every curve is there to touch, to taste.

“See?” she moans. “I look like a whale.”

This woman...

“Fucking hell, Emma. Are we looking at the same damn mirror? *Look* at yourself. You’re gorgeous.”

Her eyes actually go wide with disbelief, then suspicion. Both piss me off. Does she really think I would lie to her about this?

“What exactly do you find so offensive?” I ask, standing right behind her. “Is it here?” I trail my fingers over the swell of her arms. “Here?” I cup each breast tenderly. “Here? Or here? Or here?” In turn, I press a kiss to each

shoulder, palm each hip, and grind myself against her ass.

She shudders every time I touch her but I can see that my words are getting through to her. Even if she's not convinced by her own beauty, she's convinced that *I'm* convinced of it.

"You are so goddamn beautiful," I growl, nipping at her earlobe.. "If you need physical proof, just feel *that*."

I grab her around the waist and pull her tight against me so that she can feel my erection pushing between her ass cheeks. She sighs, her skin turning pink with desire. "Ruslan..."

I keep her in front of the mirror and make her watch as I slip my hand into her bikini bottoms. She gasps when my fingers make contact with the warm wetness of her pussy.

"How could you think you're anything less than perfect?" I growl in her ear. "Look how you glow with my child growing inside you. Look how beautiful you are, full of the life we made together."

I kiss her neck as she moans, her eyes fluttering open, then closed, then open again. "R-Ruslan..."

I circle her clit with my finger until she's a quivering mess. Then I go deep, pushing my fingers knuckle-deep inside her until her moans turn to muffled screams.

I don't even care that Vadim can probably hear us above deck. All I want right now is to make her see just how special she is to me; just how beautiful.

Her hand twists back and clings to my neck. She pulls my face towards hers and we share a messy, desperate kiss. When we break for air, her nipples are so hard they're in danger of ripping right through the fabric of her bikini top. Unable to resist, I push my hand underneath one of the cups and squeeze.

How can she, even for a second, entertain the thought that she's not desirable or beautiful? The woman would drive me insane even if she were wrapped head to toe in layer after layer. I grind into her from behind as I wring the orgasm from her sweet little cunt.

“See?” I hiss in her ear. “Do you see how totally mesmerizing you are? Look at yourself.”

“Ruslan...”

“*Look* at yourself.”

I twist her face until she’s forced to meet her reflection in the mirror. Her cheeks are flushed, lips swollen, and there are goosebumps all over her skin.

“See?” I slide my tongue down along her neck. “Fucking *perfect*.”

Then I drive home my point by bearing down on her clit with my finger. She gasps, her body jerking into mine as she comes violently all over my hand. Then I toss her towards the bed, bend her on all fours, and drive myself into her.

I fuck her hard and fast. It takes only a handful of thrusts before I pull out just so that I can finish all over her skin, to mark her as mine, as beautiful, as fucking irreplaceable.

We really should do family boat days more often.

EMMA

“Do you have a children’s menu?”

I have to bite my knuckle so I don’t laugh out loud. We’re in one of the fanciest restaurants in New York City. The only reason the kids were even allowed in at the door is because Ruslan tipped the maître d’ five hundred dollars when we got here.

The waiter seems to think it’s as crazy of a question as I do. He blinks slowly. “I’m afraid not, sir.”

Fyodor doesn’t seem in the least bit put-off. “Then you’ll cook whatever the kids want to eat, yes?”

Ruslan’s father has always seemed so amiable and mild-mannered to me. And yet, when he poses that question-that’s-not-really-a-question at the waiter, he does it with a subtle air of menace that threatens all sorts of retribution if declined.

That’s *my* reading of it, anyway. The server seems to agree. He nods like a bobblehead. “O-of course, sir. What would the, um... children like?”

Fyodor turns to Reagan and Caroline first, who are both sitting on his right looking extremely pleased to be sitting at the grownups’ table in a *very* grown-up restaurant.

“I want pizza,” Reagan declares.

“I want mac and cheese,” Caroline decides.

Josh glances at me and my heart melts just a little. “Go ahead, sweetheart. Choose whatever you want.”

“A cheeseburger,” he says quietly. “With fries.”

“Excellent choices!” Fyodor proclaims, clapping his hands together. He passes the menus to the pale-faced waiter and dismisses him with a click of his tongue.

I glance towards Ruslan, who’s sitting next to me doing his best not to smile too wide.

Caroline waves at me from across the table. “Auntie Em, can we go see the fish tank?”

“Fish tank” is a bit of a misnomer for the aquarium in the middle of the restaurant big enough to house a pod of dolphins, but I let it slide. “Go ahead. Just don’t be too loud. And don’t get in anyone’s way—” The kids are already out of their seats. “—and don’t break anything!”

Fyodor chuckles and pats me on the back of my hand. “They’re children. If they break anything, I’ll pay for it.”

“I appreciate that, but you really don’t have to do that. Or any of this, in fact,” I say, gesturing to the opulence surrounding us. The sound of champagne being uncorked a few tables over is the perfect complement to my *where-the-hell-even-are-we* sweep of the hands.

Fyodor just waves away my words. “I’ve waited a long time to be a grandfather. I was starting to think I would never get a chance to see one. And now, I have three—no, *four* grandbabies. And I couldn’t be happier.”

“Hooo boy,” I breathe. “Keep this up and I’m gonna be sobbing all over the table.”

He just pats my hand again. “Sob if you need to. I’ll replace the tablecloth, too.”

I snort and everyone joins in the laughter. Everyone except Vadim, who gives me a tight smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

I’ve been trying to make my mind up about Ruslan’s uncle for the whole of

today. We chatted a little on the yacht, shared a drink, swapped a couple of stories, even laughed once or twice. There were moments when I thought I could like him and then there were moments—like this one—when he made me feel like I was being watched.

Maybe it's just the contrast between the brothers. Fyodor makes me feel like I'm already part of the family. Vadim makes me feel like I'm being interviewed for the role... and he's not so sure I'm gonna make the cut.

"That reminds me," Fyodor says, sticking his hand into his jacket pocket. "I have something for you."

My palms start to sweat. "For me?" I ask, voice rising to a pipsqueak. I glance nervously at Ruslan. *What is this?* I mouth to him.

He just shrugs. Okay, so he didn't know about the gift his father was going to give me at the fanciest restaurant known to man?

Oh my God—it's in a massive Tiffany box.

Oh my God—is he giving me jewelry?

Should I even accept?

Before I'm done with my mental freakout, Fyodor pops the silver clasp and pulls the lid open. Inside, sitting on a plush black cushion, is the most beautiful diamond necklace I've ever laid eyes on. A trio of huge teardrop diamonds hanging from the chain, glistening like fresh frost.

"Whoa..." I whisper before my eyes rise to Fyodor's. "I... I don't know what to say."

He smiles. "It belonged to my wife."

I feel like my head is about to explode. When I glance over at Ruslan, he looks as taken aback as I feel. His eyes are wide and fastened on the necklace as though he's seeing his mother again.

"It used to have one less diamond, though," Ruslan adds softly.

Fyodor nods. "The necklace was a gift to my wife when she gave birth to my eldest son, Leonid. When Ruslan was born, I added another diamond. The

new diamond, this third one here, is for the new life you're growing inside you right now."

"Fyodor..." I still can't quite find the words. Apart from being an extraordinarily expensive gift, it's also an amazingly sentimental one. "This is too generous."

"You've made a man out of my son," Fyodor says firmly. "It's the least I can do."

Vadim clears his throat. "Your son was already a man, brother," he says as he picks up his champagne flute. "He has been a fucking *pakhan* since he was twenty-one years old."

Do I detect a smidgeon of resentment there?

No. I'm just reading into things too much.

"Being a *pakhan*, being wealthy and powerful and influential—it doesn't make a man," Fyodor retorts. "None of those things can really build a true legacy. The only real thing you leave behind is your progeny."

Vadim's mouth turns down at the corners. I catch the hint of a scowl before he turns it into an unconvincing smile. "I forget what a soft heart you have, brother." Then he hides his face behind his glass.

Awkward.

I try to gloss over it by focusing on Ruslan's father. "Fyodor, this means so much to me. But it's too much. And it belonged to your wife. Don't you want to keep it?"

"What I want is to see it *worn*, my dear. It was meant to be displayed on the neck of a beautiful woman. And if it can't be worn by my beloved wife, God rest her soul, then I'd rather see it on my son's woman. It would make me so happy. May I put it on you?"

The man looks like he has tears in his eyes. How can I say no?

It just feels so foreign. It feels like I'm slipping on someone else's skin, entering a world that I've only ever seen from the outside.

And yet, as cold as those diamonds are, I feel all warm and fuzzy inside when Fyodor fixes the clasp behind my neck and pulls his hands back to admire the view. His eyes shine with unshed tears.

“It suits you, my dear.”

I touch my neck gingerly and look around the table. Ruslan is smiling tenderly at me. Fyodor wipes away a stray tear. And Vadim... well, Vadim is busy ogling a young woman in a tight red dress making her way to her table.

I lean in a little closer to the old man. “Thank you, Fyodor,” I whisper to him. “Truly.” I touch the necklace, marveling at its solid weight. “This means so much to me.”

He smiles fondly. “Alina would have loved you. I’m sure of it.”

We spend the rest of the night eating and laughing. Fyodor is engaged, attentive, joyful. Ruslan looks more animated than I’ve ever seen him.

Only Vadim seems not to be swept up in the spirit.



That night, when the kids are asleep and it’s just Ruslan and me in bed together, I cuddle up against his chest and try to find a diplomatic way of asking him about Vadim.

“Your father is lovely.”

“I was reminded of that today. It’s been a while since I saw him so alive.”

“Your uncle, though... he’s different.” I frown, wondering how to say it without offending Ruslan. I decide to turn it back on me. “I don’t think he likes me very much.”

Ruslan glances down at me. “He’d be a fool not to.”

“I’m not saying he *has* to like me. I don’t need to be liked.” That’s so not true, but I’m trying to be chill about this. “I was just curious.”

Ruslan kisses the top of my head. “Vadim likes you fine. He’s just a tough

character to get to know. Give him a little time.”

I glance up into those confident amber eyes and calm settles over me. “You care about him, don’t you?”

“He’s my uncle,” he says simply, as though that settles it.

It settles it for me, too. Vadim is important to Ruslan. Therefore, I’ll try harder with him. Wear him down until he decides I’m not so bad after all. Because after today, I know one thing for sure: I *want* to be a part of this family.

For the child in my belly. For the children I inherited. For the family I’d lost along the way.

And for myself, too.

For a long time, I didn’t see my future very clearly. But now, I do.

And it all revolves around *him*.

EMMA

“Are you guys ready to start school next month?”

The pancakes have just hit the table, but not even the scent of butter and maple syrup can keep my stomach from twisting when Ruslan speaks up. I shoot him a glare, although he misses it because he’s looking at the three children sitting opposite us.

Reagan looks unsure. “Will my friends be there?”

Josh puts a reassuring hand on his sister’s shoulder. “It’s gonna be great, Rae. A new start. A big adventure.”

She cringes. “That’s what Aunt Em said before she took us to that scary place.”

I grimace. I’m never gonna live down that cockroach-infested motel. But before I can assure her that she’ll never have to endure a place like that again, Ruslan beats me to the punch.

“So you *don’t* want to see the huge playground at your new school?”

Her eyes go round. “They’ve got a playground?”

“The biggest playground you’ve ever seen.”

He hasn’t even glanced my way. Nor has he so much as asked for my opinion. A part of me was still hoping that Horace Mann had just been an insurance policy to secure me custody of the kids. Because there’s no way he

would make such an important decision without consulting me, right?

Wrong, as it turns out.

Ruslan's gaze veers to Josh and Caroline. "There's more, too. Basketball courts. A ballet studio."

Say something, Emma! I yell at myself. *The more he talks, the more he's going to convince them.*

But I can't think of anything to say right now that isn't just some variation of, *What the actual hell, man? We were supposed to be a team!*

Josh's eyes are sparkling with excitement. "Can we go see it?"

Ruslan nods. "I have a tour scheduled next week. We can't go sooner because the school has a very strict security protocol. Only scheduled visits are allowed."

I raise my eyebrows. "Why on earth would a private school require those kinds of precautions?"

"Because only the most important people go there."

Josh looks as thoroughly confused as I am. "But *we're* not important."

Ruslan puts his hand on Josh's shoulder. "All three of you are important to *me*."

Dammit.

It's so hard to be pissed at the man when he says shit like that with those sincere amber eyes and those sexy lips. Hell, it's hard to remember why you're pissed at him in the first place.

But I'm determined not to let him bulldoze over me. If I start playing the doormat now, that shoots the whole "equal partner" concept to hell and I don't want to set a bad precedent. I have to make sure my voice is heard.

Just not in front of the kids. Because they need peace and stability. Seeing your parents fight—well, whatever you'd call us, at least—is the exact opposite of that.

“I’m done with my pancakes!” Caroline declares. “Can I go play in the garden now?”

Reagan immediately starts chiming in, “Me, too. Me, too!”

The little one hasn’t finished her breakfast but I’m willing to overlook that because I need to prepare my soapbox. “Go on. Scram, you rascals.”

Once the kids have left the table, Josh trailing along after them, I turn to Ruslan, face screwed up in determination. “Can I see you in your office?”

One corner of his mouth twists up in amusement. Whether that has to do with my scowl or my words, I have no idea.

“Of course, *kiska*. Lead the way.”

Be strong, Emma, I tell myself. Don’t let all that charm distract you from your goal.

His hand finds the small of my back as we walk to his office. I grit my teeth.

Wait—what was my goal again?

The moment the door closes, I peel away from his touch and take up a stance against his desk. “I asked you here for a reason.” I cringe internally as soon as the words leave my lips. How does Ruslan say shit like that without sounding corny? When I do it, it’s like I’m cosplaying as Elle Woods from *Legally Blonde*.

“Another quickie on my desk?” Ruslan suggests, sauntering towards me with his eyes scanning my body.

Heat spreads through me and convulses between my legs. *Focus*.

“No!” It comes out a lot stronger than I’d intended. Mostly because I’m dangerously close to losing the plot altogether. “No. I want to talk about something serious, Ruslan. Sex is off the table.”

He lifts an eyebrow. “On the couch then?”

“You’re not listening.”

“You’re not getting to the point.”

“You’re being an ass!” I explode. “How’s that for getting to the point?”

He folds his hands in front of his waist and does me the minor courtesy of making a half-hearted attempt to tuck away the smirk. “How have I offended you?”

I exhale carefully. “I understand that you want to protect them. I know you love them. But those are *my* kids, too, and I should have been consulted before you decided to tell them—not to mention a *judge*—that you had enrolled them in a private school that I happen to hate.”

Any traces of his smile vanish completely. “You hate a school?”

I nod. “Sienna and I spent two semesters at Horace Mann before she pried us out of that hellhole.”

“You never mentioned that.”

“Probably because I’ve repressed most of my memories. The kids were cruel.” Another almost imperceptible flinch passes over his face. “We had to walk a certain way, talk a certain way. The teachers had clear favorites and, surprise-surprise, it was always whoever’s parents donated the most to the school. There were *No Tolerance for Bullying* posters on damn near every wall, but guess which kinds of bullying they let slide? The kind that only leaves invisible scars.” I’m talking fast but now that I’m on a roll, I don’t want to stop. “Sienna pulled the fire alarm one day when she saw some of the other kids picking on me. She was suspended for a week and the dean told her that the only way she could come back to school was to make a public apology to the staff and the entire student body at the next assembly. She got up there in front of the whole school and told them all to go fuck themselves.”

He smiles and I can’t help smiling myself. At the time, I was mortified. Now... less so.

“She was expelled?”

I nod. “Of course. Before she even finished the sentence. My parents were so embarrassed, they pulled me out, too. That was my experience at Horace Mann. Needless to say, I have no desire for Josh, Caroline, and Reagan to be subjected to the same shit that Sienna and I had to go through.”

As usual, his expression is indecipherable. Is he getting ready to tell me to fuck off? Or is that sympathy I see? Who the hell knows? Those amber eyes are an enigma.

“I should have discussed this with you first,” he says at last. The relief is caught in my throat, though, because I can sense that he’s not done. “But Horace Mann is the safest place in this city. That is why I chose it. To keep them safe.”

I frown. “Don’t do that. Don’t make out like their safety isn’t important to me, too.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“No, but it’s what you’re implying. Surely there are other schools with great security.” His lips purse up but I take a step forward before he can speak. “I get that you’re used to being the boss, Ruslan. But when it comes to this family, you can’t make decisions unanimously anymore.”

His eyebrows pull together. “I’m responsible for the safety of this family.”

“Doesn’t mean you get to rule with an iron fist. I get to be part of the decision.”

“I know what’s best.”

“If you did, you wouldn’t have enrolled them at Horace Mann.”

We’re almost nose to nose now. I’m feeling anger and frustration and all sorts of self-righteous indignation. But I’m also feeling the kind of heat that makes a girl all too aware of her body.

I shudder and suppress it. “I will not let you turn me into my mother, Ruslan Oryolov. She used to have a mind of her own before my father convinced her that being an Upper East Side snob was the only life worth living.”

“You think I’m going to turn you into a snob?”

“I think you’re trying—unintentionally or intentionally, not sure yet—to turn me into a compliant doormat who does what you say at the drop of a hat.”

He pauses, inscrutable as ever. “Okay.”

I blink a couple of times. “Okay?”

He swallows hard and then takes a deep breath. With it, he steps back, getting out of my face. He might as well be waving around a white flag.

“You’re right. I’ve been the boss for a very long time. I’m not used to discussing anything with anyone. Frankly, it didn’t even cross my mind. I’ll be better.”

I blink some more. It’s just not computing. He’s... apologizing? Promising to be better? Changing—for *me*?

Somebody pinch me—I must be dreaming.

But then the grandfather clock on the wall chimes out the top of the hour and the dream doesn’t end. So I do the only reasonable thing to do in this situation: I launch myself into his arms, grab his face, and pull it to mine so I can give him one hell of a kiss.

When I’m done kissing him—for now, at least—I pull back long enough to look into his eyes. “*Thank you.*”

“There’s gonna be a learning curve,” he warns.

Smiling, I nod. “I can handle that.”

“Good. Then let me handle you.”

Growling, he drops his lips to my neck and I’m suddenly aware of how hard he is. He pushes me back and I fall with a gasp against the edge of his desk. He sets my ass on the surface and spreads my legs fiercely. His eyes are glazed over like he’s not sure if he’s dreaming, either.

But when he pushes my panties to the side and slips inside of me, I hear his version of the same shuddering gasp that I just made.

This isn’t a dream. Not for him. Not for me. The sensation of him filling me, of me tightening around him, is proof of that.

He thrusts in and out of me, never losing eye contact for long. His finger slides into my mouth and I suck on it slowly, inflamed by the desire hurtling across his eyes.

It's tentative, but it's real. And it's gonna work.

We're gonna *make* it work.

RUSLAN

“Aw, come on, Ruslan! It’s been so long since I’ve been out of the house.”

She’s right about that. I’ve forced my little *kiska* to be a shut-in and now that she’s got a little taste of freedom, she’s demanding more.

I have only myself to blame.

“We’ve been out all day, Emma.”

She turns those pleading blue eyes on me and grabs my arm. “Exactly! So what’s a couple more hours? I’m *hungry*.”

That’s how we end up at The Loaded Spoon. She scoots into her seat with a happy smile and it’s hard to regret agreeing to this in the first place. Emma deserves to be wined and dined. She deserves to be seen on my arm—not as a trophy or a prize, but the yin to my yang.

She orders more food than she can possibly eat on her own and, as we’re sitting there waiting for it, I decide to pull out the flat blue box that I picked up while she’d been browsing baby clothes.

“What’s this?” Her eyes go wide as I slide the box over to her.

“I wasn’t about to let my father show me up. I had this specially made for you.”

She picks the box up tentatively and unclasps it. But her gaze veers to me before she opens the lid. “Ruslan, this is extremely not necessary.”

“Open it anyway.”

Shaking her head in disbelief, she opens the box. Another gasp. This one is higher, sharper, ten times more delicious. “Ruslan...” she murmurs as she pulls out the diamond bracelet with three fat pearls hanging off it. Her bottom lip quivers. “I can’t believe you did this.”

I wind my fingers through hers and lean closer. I want her to feel the weight of my words. “I didn’t think it was possible for me to love another man’s children as much as my own. But now, that feels like a stupid thought. I’d give them the world on a platter if I could, *kiska*. They’re mine in every way that matters. Just like you.”

She clamps down on her lip to stop it from trembling, then offers me her wrist. “Can you put it on me?”

“With pleasure.”

I fit the clasp around her wrist and she stares at it with wide eyes. “It’s blinding.”

“So are you.”

She blushes. It’s fucking adorable. Then the food hits the table and we help ourselves to what feels like one of everything on the whole damn menu. She’s been craving meat the last couple of weeks, which is definite proof that she’s carrying my baby.

The waiter is walking away with our dessert order when I notice a face that’s irritatingly familiar. “Fuck...” I mutter.

“What’s wrong?” Emma asks immediately.

Of course, the bastard heads directly for the table next to ours. And he’s not alone, either. Emma follows the direction of my gaze. Her eyes land on Adrik—but she doesn’t pale until she sees the woman standing next to him.

“Jessica Allens,” she hisses.

“Well, well. Funny running into you here,” Adrik remarks with that smarmy smile of his. “You both know my date, of course. Say hello, Jess.”

Jessica's gaze is fixed squarely on Emma. There's not even a hint of a polite social smile. "Officially dating your boss then?" she says coldly. "How on trend. You can't buy class, can you?"

"Alright now," Adrik intercedes quickly. "Let's play nice, shall we? After all, Ruslan here is one of my oldest friends."

I arch an eyebrow. "You're playing fast and loose with that word."

Adrik holds a hand to his heart. "You wound me."

"If only."

"Are you really gonna let them talk to us like that?" Jessica demands.

Just the wheedling irritant that is her voice makes me want to commit murder. Connections be damned. No amount of power or influence is worth dealing with Jessica fucking Allens.

I made the right choice when I jettisoned her.

Adrik only smirks. "Ruslan is just a little miffed that I was able to do what he couldn't. It's the way of the world, my dear. Other people's success engenders envy and bitterness."

"Your success was stolen off the back of mine," I growl. "What you are, *friend*, is a fucking copycat bootlicker without a single original idea in his head."

His smile stays frozen in place as he turns his attention to Emma instead of responding to me. "I must say, dear, you're practically *glowing*."

I stiffen instantly. Surely that had to be a coincidence. No one but my inner circle knows that Emma is pregnant.

I watch him closely. There's no indication that he knows more than he should, but my skin is still crawling as he licks his lips. "Blue really is your color. Matches your eyes perfectly."

He doesn't know. He's just trying to goad me.

Emma clears her throat self-consciously. "I'd concentrate on your own date, Adrik."

Jessica practically hisses. “You know what they say: men can smell a sure thing from a mile away.”

Emma’s eyes pop with outrage but I’m already out of my seat and bringing her with me. Halfway to the door, I pause and turn back to Adrik. This whole thing doesn’t sit right with me. I have to stop assuming anything’s a coincidence with him anymore. I mean, he just *happens* to be at the same restaurant that Emma and I choose on our only day out in forever?

Fuck no.

This motherfucker is up to something. And if Emma weren’t here, I might have just stuck around to find out what. But I’m not about to put her at risk. Especially not now.

A jolt on my hand pulls my attention back toward where we came from. I see Adrik’s fingers wrapped around Emma’s forearm, just above the bracelet I clasped on her myself. It’s a sick version of a kids’ game, the three of us with hands linked like this.

Adrik stares into her face and smiles crookedly. “Goodbye, Emma. Pregnancy really does suit you.”

I go fucking cross-eyed.

He knows.

How the *fuck* does he know?

I don’t wait around to find out. I rip Emma away and rush her out of the door.

“R-Ruslan?” Emma’s voice is shaky. “Are you alright?”

I don’t bother answering. Instead, I call Kirill.

He answers after only a few rings. “Yo. What’s up?”

“You, Fyodor, Vadim. Half an hour. My office.”

“I’ll set it up.”

The line goes dead and Emma’s worry grows more pronounced. Her knee is bouncing now and I can see her vein popping in my peripheral vision.

“Ruslan?”

“I should never have taken you out today.”

She bites her bottom lip. “It was a good day—”

“Right up until that fucker showed up with his banshee.”

“I-is this about... the drug that he ripped off?”

If only it were *just* about that. “He knows too much.”

“My pregnancy,” she whispers in a small voice.

“The moment we step out of the estate, we’re exposed. You’re exposed. And that makes you an easy target.”

“Ruslan, you’re overthinking.” Her voice is comforting, seductively so, but I’m too far gone to be soothed.

I blare on the horn as we approach the gates of my estate. They fling open and I speed through onto the driveway. But even after the gates are closed behind us and the garage door is sealed shut, I can’t bring myself to relax.

Emma’s hand lands on my arm but, gentle as it is, it doesn’t stop me from flinching. “Ruslan—”

“I’ll explain everything to you soon. But right now, I need to collect my thoughts and get ready for this meeting.”

Her face turns somber but she nods all the same. “Okay. You’ll find me afterwards?”

I nod and bend down, catching her lips with mine. Then I pull away and step out of the car. There’s a time for kissing the woman you love and there’s a time for gutting any motherfucker who thinks he can take her away from you.

This is the latter.

I’ve been acting under the belief that Adrik is a mild threat. A pest who can be easily handled, easily neutralized. But I no longer believe that.

I underestimated him. And that’s not a mistake I intend to make again.

Not when I have a family to raise.

Not when I have lives to protect.

RUSLAN

Two things never change at these gatherings: Vadim's eyes darting from side to side and my father sitting placidly in his chair, daydreaming of his gardens instead of giving a damn about the issue at hand.

"You have nothing to say, brother?" my uncle demands, forcing Fyodor to meet his eyes.

"Does he need to say anything?" I interject. "I'm the *pahkan*."

"And you wouldn't have called this meeting unless you wanted our opinions."

"Wrong. I called this meeting because I expect your support."

"Meaning what?" Vadim fumes. "Our thoughts are of no consequence to you?"

That's putting it mildly. But I rein in my tongue and remember that, at the end of the day, I have to lead. And in order to lead, you can't alienate your closest *vors*.

Even if one in particular is being a pain in the ass.

I stare my uncle down. "Are you saying that you're opposed to my decision?"

"Are you saying you've already *made* the decision?" He turns to look at his older brother. "And do you agree with it?"

Fyodor doesn't spare a glance in Vadim's direction. Instead, he gazes at me. He looks like a man with no skin in the game. We might as well be discussing the weather, not violent underworld warfare. "The Oryolovs and the Makarovs have been allies for four generations. This bad blood with you and Adrik started as silly, friendly competition."

"That's what I've believed all these years, too," I agree. "But something changed along the way. It became more than just friendly sparring. It became fucking personal."

"Ruslan's right," Kirill offers, throwing his voice into the fray. "Adrik crossed a line by abducting Sergey and stealing the Venera formula. If that weren't enough, he also botched Ruslan's launch of Venera. A botch that cost civilian lives—"

"There will be a great many more civilian lives lost if you engage Adrik in open war," Vadim points out.

"You surprise me, Uncle," I muse. "You've never been one to advise caution. I believe you once called it the 'coward's first instinct.'"

Vadim's eyes flare. "That is only where our enemies are concerned."

"And what is Adrik if not an enemy?" I crack my knuckles and lean forward. "He's certainly no longer a friend to the Oryolov Bratva. Especially given the threats he has made against Emma."

Vadim stiffens, his skin going blotchy with unease. "He threatened Emma?"

"He made a point of commenting on her pregnancy."

Vadim's eyes bulge. "But... *how*? We were the only ones you told. And none of us would betray you."

"Can we be sure of that?" Fyodor asks quietly.

For the first time, I notice the thin sheen of sweat on my uncle's brow. He runs a hand over his head. "I know Arkady, Nikolai, and Mikael. All three of those men would rather slit their own throats than go against the Bratva." His attention veers to Fyodor. "Do you agree, brother?"

Fyodor hesitates for only a second. "Yes, I agree. I've known those men for

decades. I branded them with their marks myself. Those men are loyal.”

Kirill purses his lips. “Well, *someone* talked.”

Vadim raises an eyebrow. “Unless... unless Adrik has eyes on you, nephew. A spy. Someone you would never suspect. Someone who could get close enough to watch without being noticed themselves.”

I shake my head. “All my staff have been properly vetted.”

“Are you sure?”

His tone rubs me the wrong way. Mostly because that nasally pitch is making me doubt my vetting process, as well as every member of staff I’ve employed that has any kind of exposure to Emma and the children.

Which, in this case, is all of them.

Fuck.

“This was not an easy decision to come to,” I say through gritted teeth. “But, somehow, Adrik has shifted from thorn in my side to full-blown menace. And he needs to be dealt with.”

I glance around the room. Kirill’s expression is the easiest to read. He nods at me with resignation. Fyodor looks back towards the garden, uncaring. And Vadim... Vadim is looking back at me with grim submissiveness.

“You are the *pahkan*,” he concludes. “Your will, our hands.”



Emma’s fingers glide over the skin on either side of my forehead. She caresses gently before adding pressure. “*Blyat*,” I growl. “That feels amazing.”

Her breath flutters against my ear. “Breathe. Relax. I’m here.”

And amazingly enough, I do relax.

How? I have no idea. I’m in the middle of a war and yet here I am, letting my eyes drift closed as my woman massages my scalp.

“If you don’t want to talk about it, we don’t have to,” she adds.

It’s generous, especially since I know she desperately wants to know how it went. I’m still processing it myself. But, quite apart from my promise to be honest and transparent, I find that I actually *want* to share with her.

“I made the decision to take Adrik out today.”

I’m expecting some kind of feedback. A hissed inhale, a flutter in her touch. But all I’m met with is silence. I open an eye and glance at her.

Emma is still stroking my forehead, her lips pursed up thoughtfully. “And you feel... sad about that?” she ventures.

“I’m not sad about anything.”

“Can we remove the macho male ego from this conversation, please? It might actually be a lot more effective that way.”

“Ouch.”

She giggles and that sound goes a long way in relaxing me, too. “Come on,” she whispers. “Tell me what you’re *really* feeling.”

The suggestion makes me shudder. Have I ever just sat with my thoughts and let myself *feel*? If I’d done that when we lost Mother and Leonid, I’d have imploded. Maybe that’s why I decided a long time ago to keep an arm’s distance between me and my feelings.

“I’ve known Adrik since I was a kid,” I murmur. “We used to play together as little boys.”

Emma’s fingers stop moving abruptly. Just long enough to meet my eyes. I can see all that empathy swimming inside her, ready to forgive a man that she hates simply because she’s able to picture who he was before he was a monster.

“Is this story gonna make me feel sorry for Adrik?”

I laugh brusquely. “I don’t know.”

She sighs. “Go on.”

“We’ve always had this competitive thing going between us. In the early days, it was more like sibling rivalry than open hostility.”

“When did it change?”

Good fucking question. “Adrik was always a thorn in my side. Constantly trying to outdo me, undercut me, sabotage me... but it never got to the point that I considered him a legitimate threat. At least, not until the Venera launch.”

“And now, you’ve decided to...” She pauses like the thought of ordering an execution is still too much to even think, let alone say out loud. “To do this thing. And you’re feeling... bad about this decision?”

“It is the right choice. There was a time when the competitiveness between us was a good thing. He pushed me to be better. A more accomplished fighter, a faster runner, a better shot. It was something of a game.”

“Until it wasn’t?”

“Until I became *pahkan* and everything stopped being a game to me.”

“Maybe he was jealous of what you became.”

I grind my teeth. “I lost my mother and my only brother to get it.”

“Sometimes, people don’t appreciate the cost of certain things because they never have to pay that price themselves.” Sighing, my gaze finds hers. She stops massaging my forehead and cups the side of my face. “Maybe it doesn’t have to end this way.”

I smile painfully. “It’s kind that you’re trying to save him.”

“*Him?*” she balks. “Fuck him. I’m trying to find a way for you to avoid the guilt you’re already feeling for so much as considering taking him out.”

This woman. My God. She is a fucking marvel.

I shrug up to an elbow and pull her a little closer to me. “I’ve never done this before,” I whisper as my finger starts stroking the soft skin behind her knee.

“Gotten a scalp massage?”

I roll my eyes. “No. Discussed strategy with a partner. Discussed anything with a partner, really. I’ve never even wanted to before now.”

“And you... don’t hate it?” she asks hopefully.

I kiss her lips softly. “It could be worse.”

She sighs with obvious relief. “Good. Because I really, really enjoy this.” Her expression shifts. “Uh—I mean, not the topic exactly. Just the *feeling* of—”

“I know, *kiska*. I get it.”

She smiles self-consciously and places a hand on my chest, just over my heart. “I want to be able to help you carry all this weight you’re toting around. You don’t have to do anything on your own anymore. We’re a team, Ruslan. We’re in this together. I want you to know that I’ve always got your back.”

I used to think that this kind of dynamic would be claustrophobic. But as it turns out, it’s invigorating.

In the end, it also helps put things into perspective. Because the truth is, I will do whatever it takes to keep this woman in my arms safe. To keep her happy. To keep her beside me.

Including destroying someone I’ve known my entire life.

“I have something for you,” I tell her suddenly. I reach over to the bedside table and withdraw a sheaf of papers from the drawer. I hand it to her and lean back to watch her reaction.

But one minute passes, then two, and Emma still hasn’t gotten around to turning over the first page. Given how bad her hands are trembling, I don’t think she’s read more than the first line of the first page, actually.

“R-Ruslan...”

“Emma.” My palms massage the backs of her arms as I nudge her forehead with mine to make her look at me. “Breathe, *kiska*.”

“It’s my parents, isn’t it?” Her hands are not the only things shaking. Her voice is dangerously wobbly, too. “They found a judge to overturn the order

and—”

“No.”

She blinks at me helplessly. “No?”

“They’ve dropped their case entirely,” I inform her. “These documents are from the court stating that you and you alone have permanent custody of the kids. It’s over, Emma. You won.”

It takes a minute for those words to sink in. Her eyebrows inch upwards as her mouth opens wider.

“I... won?” she says, as though she’s trying on the words for size.

“You won.”

She clutches my forearm. “So no one can take the kids from me?”

“Not a damn person alive.”

Emma looks down at the papers again. “I can’t believe it. It’s finally over.”

She deserves this moment. She deserves to feel this kind of overwhelming relief. Fuck, *I’m* feeling it and I haven’t even been in these kids’ lives a whole year yet.

“We should celebrate!” she decides eagerly. “Let’s take the kids out for lunch—just the five of us. What do you say?”

“What I say is, why go out when you have a five-star chef on hand to prepare us a picnic in the gardens?”

She grins. “I’ll round up the munchkins.”



Half an hour later, we’re sprawled across the South Gardens on a giant picnic blanket weighed down with sandwiches, pastries, cookies, cakes, and on and on. The girls of course went right for the sugar, which might have something to do with why they’re currently doing cartwheels across the grass.

“Hope they sweat out all that energy by dinner,” I mutter.

“I wouldn’t hold your breath.” Emma giggles and runs a hand through Josh’s hair. He glances between the two of us with curiosity but he doesn’t say anything.

“When do we start our new school again?” Caroline asks as she skips over to us. “I have an outfit all ready for the first day and I can’t *wait* to wear it.”

I smile. “Fortunately, the first day of school is around the corner. Even more fortunately, you don’t have to worry about what to wear each day. Because you three will have a uniform.”

Caroline and Reagan plop down onto the edge of the blanket. “A uniform?” Rae repeats as she reaches for her sixth or twelfth cookie of the afternoon. “What’s that?”

“It means that everyone in the whole school wears the same clothes,” Josh explains for me.

Emma nods. “Ruslan and I checked out the school yesterday. It’s amazing! And the uniforms are pretty cool, too. You’ll have blue skirts and white shirts and on special occasions, there’s even a tie.”

“You went to the school?” Josh asks as the girls ooh and ahh about the dress code.

“Mhmm. It’s different from the one that Ruslan had in mind for you guys but I think you’ll love it a lot more.”

“How come it’s different?” Reagan chimes in.

This kid. She knows when to listen and when to ask the hard-hitting questions. I see investigative journalism in her future.

I answer before Emma can. “Because your aunt wants the best for you. And I overlooked certain things when I picked Horace Mann. But with her input, we decided on the best choice for you guys. And that’s Chilton Academy.”

She purses her lips as she considers that. “Ruslan,” she asks at last, “are you our dad now?”

Emma nearly chokes on her glass of orange juice. She puts the glass down but Reagan's eyes are fixed on me.

Forget journalism. She needs to go into enhanced interrogation.

Emma puts her hand on Reagan's knee. "Rae, sweetheart—"

"I suppose I am now."

Emma stops short. I probably should have spoken to her first before answering Reagan's question but, hell, you don't always have the time to discuss everything. And this feels right.

"I thought so," she hums knowingly.

Emma's eyes are fixed on me but I keep my gaze on Reagan, Caroline, and Josh. "I'm new to this whole fatherhood thing," I admit. "And I'm probably gonna make a lot of mistakes along the way."

"We'll help you," Josh offers softly.

Emma's bottom lip gives a little quiver. "I know you will, Josh," I say with a smile. "And even with that help, I'll still fall short. But one thing you can be sure of—I will never let anyone hurt you guys. I'm gonna keep you safe and if anyone tries to hurt you three... well, I'll just have to kill them."

I probably should have rephrased the end of that sentence. Emma lets out a shocked little gasp but the kids look delighted. Josh is smiling and Reagan and Caroline giggle.

"He's talking metaphorically, angels," Emma says, throwing me a fierce glare. "*Right, Ruslan?*"

I nod as solemnly as I can. "Something like that."

Then the girls jump on top of me, squealing with delight, and, a few seconds later, I hear Emma's laughter join theirs.



We don't usually train in the evenings, but tonight, Josh insisted. It was only

six and Emma had already taken the girls upstairs for their baths so I figured, why not?

I've come to look forward to our boxing lessons just as much as he does. It's more than just a lesson in self-defense at this point; it's a lesson in life.

Ever since Josh started therapy, he's been so much more focused in the ring. But there's none of the same anxious desperation in it that marked that first day. Now, he's smooth and calm and controlled and powerful.

It makes me so fucking proud.

"So," I say during our break, "how's therapy going?"

I don't usually ask unless Josh brings it up himself, but there's a lightness about him today that encourages me to bring up the topic.

"Good. I like Dr. Alicia."

"I'm glad. And the nightmares have stopped?"

Josh glances at me. "Yeah. No more of 'em."

I already know that. I've taken to standing outside Josh's door at odd times in the night just to make sure. Emma caught me once and I pretended that I'd gotten a call and had to take it in the hallway.

She has worried enough about these kids for one lifetime. It's time for me to take over that responsibility.

"Ruslan, can I ask you something?"

"You can always ask me anything, Josh."

He gives me a small, tight smile. "What do you *really* do?"

I answer carefully. "I run a company called Bane Security. That's how your aunt and I met. She was my secretary."

Josh shakes his head. "Yeah, I know that's what you do officially. But I want to know what you *really* do."

Is he asking me what I think he's asking me?

“Josh...”

“Those men who took me... I know they took me because of you, Ruslan.” There’s nothing accusatory about his tone. In fact, he looks more uncomfortable than scared right now, as though he’s worried about offending me. “I know you’re important. And you’re rich. And there are people after you sometimes. I think... I think that means something.”

I put my hand on his shoulder. “You’re a smart kid.”

“I’m not too young to know the truth, if that’s what you’re gonna say.”

“You’re right.” I sigh and remove my hand. “You’re careful. And observant. And *smart*. And my policy is, if you’re mature enough to ask the questions, you’re mature enough to get honest answers.”

Josh sucks in a surprised breath. He was expecting excuses, non-answers. Maybe even lies. He doesn’t deserve any of that.

“Your instincts aren’t wrong, Josh. Tell me—what are your theories?”

He glances nervously at me. “M-my... theories?”

“Go ahead. Go wild.”

He lets out a self-conscious little laugh. “I was playing around with ‘superhero.’ You know, like Batman.”

“I’m flattered.”

He shakes his head. “Then I thought ‘spy.’”

“But not anymore?”

He shrugs. “Sometimes, it feels like you could be...” He trails off, dropping his gaze at the same time. Then his mouth clamps shut and instinctively I think I know what he was about to say.

“The bad guy.”

Josh’s eyes go wide with worry. “I know that you’re not—”

“Sometimes, that’s *exactly* what I am.” I clear my throat. “I’m going to tell

you the honest truth, Josh, but I need you to agree to keep it secret from anyone who would ever ask you. Can I trust you with that?”

He nods so hard that I fear for his neck for a moment. “Of course,” he says proudly. “I won’t tell anyone.”

“Good.” I clear my throat and kneel in front of him. “I am in charge of something called a Bratva. I’m not going to explain exactly what that is yet, but it means I don’t always follow the rules, Josh. That includes the law. I’m often involved in dangerous things; I’m often involved with dangerous people. More often than not, I’m the bad guy. *But*—when it comes to you and your sisters, when it comes to Aunt Emma, I’m always gonna be your biggest protector. You have nothing to fear from me. Not now. Not ever.”

He exhales sharply.

“Are you scared?”

“No,” he insists. “Not of you.”

I nod and squeeze his shoulder. “Good. Because I only ever want you to feel safe when you’re with me.”

His expression churns slowly but I have no idea what any of it means. Is he still processing? Have I shared too much with him? Is this one of those conversations I should have had *after* talking to Emma? Or maybe she should have been included in the first place.

Fucking it up already. This whole “equal partners” thing is a tricky bastard.

“Remember what I told you, Josh. I want you to feel safe with me. That means you can tell me anything.”

He chews on his bottom lip. It reminds me so much of Emma. His eyes dart up at me and then back down again. The process repeats several times before he finally opens his mouth.

“I... I wanna be like you,” he says so quietly that I almost miss it. “I know that you do bad things sometimes. But I also know that you’re a good man. You’ve taken care of us. You’ve given us a home. You looked after us when our own dad didn’t. You don’t always follow the rules but I know you’d

never hurt me like he did.”

Something inside me twists. Something deeply feral, instinctive... protective.

He’s right, though.

He’s right about all of it.

“I want to grow up to be a leader. I want to grow up and protect my family like you’ve protected us. I want to fight like you. I want to be a part of the... the *Bratva*... if that’s what it takes.”

The stakes have never felt higher. Again, I find myself thinking that Emma should be here for this conversation. But as I look into Josh’s steadfast eyes, the confident set of his jaw, the way his nostrils are flared with determination, I realize something.

This is *his* decision to make.

No one else’s.

“Your life is your choice, Josh.”

He looks stunned for a moment, as though the concept of having control over his own life is a foreign concept. I suppose, for a child, it is.

But Josh isn’t a child anymore.

“Dad used to tell me that I had to be whatever he wanted me to be.”

My jaw clenches furiously. “I’m not him. I’ll never do what he did to you.”

Josh’s face splits into a brilliant smile. “I already knew that.”

EMMA

Chilton Academy.

It's still an elite New York City private school, which means it's still a red-bricked monstrosity with ivy creeping up the walls and Latin credos worked into the wrought iron gates.

But it's not Horace Mann, so it only gives me a fraction of the full-body cringe that that old nightmare warzone would've given me.

As old school as the facade is, there's nothing old school about the security system they've got in place. Boris has to scan his ID twice each at two different gates before he can drive the children and me into the school's drop-off circle. Once he's parked, I walk the kids towards the school. The girls have a separate entrance than Josh, so he tags along as I drop Caro and Rae off at their respective classrooms.

The classrooms are bright, airy, and colorful. Every teacher has that beaming sense of *I'm friendly but you will learn from me, goddammit* competence that puts my mama bear claws at ease.

When Josh sees the sign for his classroom, he gives me a wide grin and lopes off.

"Wait!" I call after him. "Don't you want me to walk with you?"

Josh gives me an apologetic smile. "I'm good—but thanks, Aunt Em."

I suppress a sigh. *He's all grown up.* "Off you go then."

Sighing, I turn and start the trek back to the car. It's reassuring to pass by the armed security stationed at every corner. One of them mutters into the microphone at his lapel as I walk down the hall.

And just like that, an idea lights up in my head.

I pick up my speed and hustle back. The more I think about it, the more I like this. Now, I just have to convince Boris that taking me to Bane Corp. is a good idea. I decide to be super casual about it. "Kids are all settled, Boris. We can head over to the office now."

He twists around in his seat. "The Bane offices, ma'am?"

"Yes. I have something urgent to discuss with Mr. Oryolov."

Boris clears his throat uncomfortably. "Maybe I should call and check with him first—"

"Boris." I fix him with my most intimidating glare. "I am not Mr. Oryolov's prisoner. Nor am I his puppet. I do not need to check with him before I go somewhere and neither do you."

"Actually, *I* do. I'm on the payroll."

"And you're assigned to *me*. Which means you take me where I want to go." He's still antsy, so I add, "It's Bane, Boris. I'm not asking you to take me to a seedy strip club."

He snorts with laughter and nods. "Alright then. Bane it is."

"Wonderful."

The drive to Bane takes longer than I expect in New York City traffic. I stew with my new idea but the bulb over my head doesn't dim.

This could be something...

I unbuckle myself before Boris has even come to a full stop outside of the Bane skyscraper. I toss him a thank you and race into the building. I'm moving so fast that it doesn't even hit me until the elevator doors open how freaking weird it is to be back here. Walking down the hall feels a little like trying on an old, forgotten dress. It's familiar, but it doesn't quite fit right. I

haven't been away for that long and yet, it feels like *forever*.

What's even weirder is seeing the new guy at what was once my desk. Less weird is seeing the harried look of terror on his face. All things considered, that's pretty standard for Ruslan Oryolov's assistants.

Ruslan's voice booms through the closed door of his office room. With every word, the new guy shivers.

"Fuck," he mutters, completely unaware of my presence. "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck."

I smile. Not so long ago, that had been me.

That's when New Guy glances up and nearly jerks out of his seat. "My goodness, you scared me!" He glances quickly towards the door. "My boss is... um... What can I do for you?"

Ruslan's weekly schedule is pulled up on the screen but there's a big, glaring blank spot in the middle of his calendar where there should be a meeting. I can't help but notice that New Guy's desk is a mess, too. I can sympathize. Mine had been the same the first few weeks on the job. It takes a while to get your bearings when there's a minotaur stomping around and snarling Russian obscenities in the office behind you.

"I think I should be the one asking that question."

New Guy frowns. "Um—"

"What were you freaking out about when I walked in?" I ask, forgetting for a moment why I'm here in the first place. "I might be able to help."

"How?"

"Because, in a former life, I *was* you."

New Guy looks pasty. There's a nice guy there, deep down, buried beneath layers of fear. When he sees I'm serious, he wipes away the sweat on his brow. "I don't know how, but I've lost an appointment here," he says, pointing to the blank spot on his computer screen. "And I don't remember what or who it was with. I don't even have a number I can—"

I lean over his shoulder and nudge him to the side a little. Then I commandeer his keyboard and start tapping away at it.

“Wait. What are you... no, don’t press—wait!”

“Take a breath, sweetheart,” I advise him. “And maybe a Xanax.” I push the screen to the side so that he can see what I’ve recovered. “There. I fixed it for you.”

He looks ready to cry with relief as he turns his gaze to me. “Are you an angel?”

I laugh. I’m explaining the trick to him when Ruslan stalks out of his office on the warpath. His scowl dissipates the moment he sees me.

New Guy jerks to his feet and tries to bow and salute at the same time, which ends up looking like he’s slapping himself in the face and doubling over.

“Emma, what are you...” Ruslan trails off as his eyes veer towards New Guy. “She is *never* to be kept waiting. You see her, you send her into my office no matter what. I don’t care if I’m in a meeting or on a call or in fucking open heart surgery. Is that understood?”

“Y-yes, of course, sir. I apologize—”

“I just got here, Ruslan. It’s okay.” I walk over to him, take his arm, and steer him back into his office. Partly because I do need to talk to him and partly because I want to spare New Guy the indignity of peeing himself.

“What are you doing here?” he growls, glancing at all the windows like armies of assassins might bust in at a moment’s notice.

“I convinced Boris to drive me over after dropping the kids off. So don’t yell at him, either, because I didn’t give him a choice.” I glance towards the closed door of his office. “Do you have to be such a brute in the office? Haven’t you ever heard the saying, ‘you catch more flies with honey than vinegar’?”

He rolls his eyes. “I prefer a ‘fear over love’ kind of approach.”

I snort. “Have you made him cry yet?”

“First day,” he says with entirely too much satisfaction. “And yet he showed up to work the next day, so I figured he had potential.” He pulls me hard against him and wraps his arms around me. “You still haven’t answered my question.”

“While dropping the kids off, I had an idea.”

“Does it involve seducing me between meetings? Because I could get on board with that idea.”

His hands slide down to my ass. I grab them and pull them back up. “*Concentrate*, Mr. Oryolov. That is not what I came here for. This is serious business.”

“Then you should have scheduled an appointment. Although that dolt out there probably would have fucked that up, too.”

I shake my head in amusement. “You know... I could always come back here and be your assistant.”

His eyebrows knit together but there’s a definitive smile on his face. “Hmm... I could offer you added benefits...”

“If you’re talking about the benefits I’m thinking of, then it’s a done deal.” His hands are wandering again so I twist out of his arms and put some distance between us. “But that’ll have to wait. You’re not paying attention.”

“If you wanted me to pay attention, you should have worn a different blouse.” I look down at my white silk blouse which I used to think was quite conservative. The way Ruslan is looking at me right now suggests otherwise, though. “Now, come here and—”

“This is about Adrik.”

That gets his attention. “Adrik?”

Suddenly, I feel nervous. Should I be butting in this way? Do I have the right to get involved in Bratva matters? When it comes to the family, demanding an equal voice is one thing. But Bratva business is a totally different ball game.

“Emma?”

Ruslan doesn't sound annoyed or pissed. He sounds... curious?

I clear my throat. "It's just an idea," I say softly. "It's yours to take or leave. I just thought it might help."

He grows instantly serious. "Hold on. Let me get Kirill in here, too." He rounds his desk to call in Kirill and I feel a thrill of excitement race down my back.

Not only is he prepared to hear me out, but he's taking me seriously. I don't say a word... but it means everything to me. Mostly, it means that we have a chance at a real future together. One based on mutual respect. Understanding. *Love.*

He will always be the alpha.

But I get to be his queen.

EMMA

“You don’t have to do this.”

I sigh. It’s probably the hundredth time he’s told me that in the last week. Okay, so maybe that’s a *slight* exaggeration. But we’ve entered the high double digits for sure.

“Ruslan...”

He shakes his head in exasperation. “I know. I fucking know. But what I don’t know is why I agreed to this crazy plan in the first place.”

“You thought this plan was brilliant when you first heard it.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “I don’t think I used the word ‘brilliant.’”

I put my hand under my chin cartoonishly. “No? Must’ve been ‘inspired’ then.”

“Not even close.”

“I’m positive I heard ‘bold.’”

He lets out a weary sigh. “I’ll cop to that. But that was before...”

“Before what?”

His eyes scan up and down my body. “Before I saw you in that dress.”

I catch a glimpse of myself in the window of the Audi as it rolls to a stop in

front of us. Speaking of “brilliant,” “bold,” and “inspired,” the dress I’m wearing does a brilliant, bold, and inspirational job of hiding my baby bump. The corset stops just above my stomach and the skirt flares out over it. It’s enough to hoodwink even me.

I maneuver into the back of the car in my dangerously high platform heels and reach for Ruslan’s hand the moment he joins me.

“You have nothing to worry about, okay? I got this.”

“It doesn’t have to be you.” His jaw is clenched tight. So much so that I can see a muscle I never knew existed twitching along his left cheekbone.

“Of course it does. He won’t be interested in anyone else.” Even still, I can hear his teeth grind together. “Exhale, Ruslan. You’re gonna chip a tooth.”

His gaze glides over my dress again. The combination of the short skirt and the high heels make my legs look miles long. Gotta be honest—I’m not mad about that.

Ruslan seems to be, though.

“You should have worn a different dress. This one’s too short. And too tight. And too...”

“Go on,” I tease, whirling my hand toward him. “I’m all ears.”

He glowers. “Couldn’t you have picked something with long sleeves and a grandma collar?”

I suppress a laugh. This possessive little freakout of his is actually helping calm me down a little. It’s not like I can admit to feeling nervous now anyway. Not when Ruslan is fully prepared to yank me out of this mission before it’s even begun.

“I’m gonna be fine. I can handle this, Ruslan. You just have to trust me.”

His eyes snap to mine, incandescent with anger. “Of course I trust you. It’s that rat bastard I don’t trust.”

I squeeze his hand as we approach the nightclub. The music pulses down the road towards us. Feels like the red carpet is being rolled out. “It’s gonna be a

good night.”

I’m not even sure Ruslan hears me. When we stop, he gets out of the Audi and, a few moments later, he opens my door and helps me out of the car. There’s a slight chill in the air but I feel immune to it. Turns out, adrenaline is quite warming.

He holds my hand tight as we make our way through the club and into the VIP section. I hoist myself onto one of the high barstools while Ruslan orders me a seltzer water. He leans an elbow on the bar and turns to me, his face roiling with emotional thunder.

“Ruslan, we’re at a nightclub,” I whisper to him. “You need to lighten up. At least pretend you know how to have fun.”

The same glare he’s worn all night keeps burning in my direction. “Are you *sure* about this?”

“It was my idea, remember?” I place my hand against his wrist. “You gonna give this plan a fair shake or what?” It takes him a moment but he finally nods. “Good. Then kiss me and get outta here.”

He bends down and drops a kiss on my lips. I’m expecting something quick, gentle, businesslike. But what I get instead is the kind of open-mouthed, tongue-flickering kiss that has my head spinning and my panties feeling extremely unnecessary.

“My Lord,” I gasp when he breaks the kiss. “What was *that*?”

“Balm for the soul,” is all he says before he walks away.

I’m still trying to get my head screwed on straight when I feel another presence at my back. *Wow, that took much less time than I’d anticipated. Thank God for predictable men.*

“Well, well—fancy running into you here.”

Adrik takes the stool that Ruslan just vacated. He’s wearing a silk shirt open to mid-chest, with gold chains looped heavily almost down to his belly button. Whoever told him he looked good tonight was either blind, a liar, or both.

“Adrik,” I greet coldly, looking away.

“Don’t tell me he’s disappeared on you already? I thought Ruslan had better manners than that.”

“He had business to attend to.”

I eye the bartender, but he’s indisposed on the other side of the bar. It’s gonna look too suspicious if I flag him down just so that Adrik can order a drink.

Wait it out. Be patient.

“Business? Not even that can justify leaving a beautiful woman all by herself at the bar.” He flashes me a smile and I have to try my hardest not to cringe away from him.

Instead, I reach for my seltzer water.

“Not in the mood for something stronger tonight?”

I roll my eyes. “Don’t try to be cute. It doesn’t suit you.”

He laughs, unfazed. “I like you, Emma. I can see why Ruslan’s head was turned. Of course, now that he has you...”

The bartender is on our side of the bar now but Adrik doesn’t seem to be interested in getting himself a drink.

Goddammit. Drink something, you useless piece of shit!

“What are you trying to imply?”

He shrugs innocently. “I’m not implying anything. I’m just making an observation. He’s over there somewhere schmoozing the VIPs, while you’re sitting here by your lonesome. Doesn’t seem very gentlemanly of him.”

“Oh, and you know something about being a gentleman, do you?”

“More than Ruslan, it seems.”

“Alright, then tell me, Adrik: is it ‘gentlemanly’ to make a woman drink alone?”

He arches his brow. A second later, he snaps his fingers in the direction of the

bartender. “Gin and tonic. On the rocks.”

I slide my hand into the discreet side pocket in my dress. It’s starting to feel a little too tight. Of course, that could just be the nerves talking.

“No Jessica this evening?” My voice shakes a little but I’m hoping that the music drowns it out. *Get it together, Em. You’re the one that wanted to do this.*

“She’s on call if I need her.”

“Poor girl,” I sigh sarcastically. “Must get tiring being on call for a man.”

“She’s used to it. She was trained well by your man.”

The implication is not even remotely subtle. If I didn’t have an ulterior motive, I’d have walked—no, *ran*—a long time ago. Instead, I’m stuck here, waiting for my window of opportunity.

In the side pocket of my dress, my fingers close around the small pill and withdraw it in a closed fist beneath the bar counter. The bartender slides over Adrik’s drink a second later.

This is it.

Here goes nothing...

“Pass me a napkin,” I request. “They’re right behind you.”

Adrik twists around to reach for them and I act fast. I don’t have time to check to make sure no one’s watching me. I just suck in a breath and pop the little pill right into his gin and tonic. I’ve been assured that the pill is supposed to disintegrate the moment it hits liquid. Except that I’m pretty sure I can still see it, nestled between two ice cubes and fizzing away merrily.

Of course he had to order the fucking drink with rocks.

“Here you go.”

I take the napkin and hold eye contact. He can’t look at his drink until after the pill has dissolved or else this whole plan is shot to shit. “Can I ask you something?”

He glances back at me, his hand snaking around his glass. He jostles the drink and the pill sinks between the cubes.

Thank God...

He takes a big sip of it. “Anything, my dear. Ask away.”

I’m sweating under the armpits now. That’s one thing no one ever tells you about this kind of business: it’s hard to feel like a femme fatale undercover spy when you’re sweating like a pig.

“Why do you hate Ruslan so much?”

He raises his eyebrows and takes another gulp of his gin and tonic. “I don’t hate him.” The answer feels robotic, though. Rehearsed. “I’m just a businessman trying to make a name for myself. Or are you trying to tell me that Ruslan is afraid of a little healthy competition?”

His drink is nearly done already. I tilt my head to the side, eyes watering as I try not to blink and break eye contact. “I’m not trying to tell you anything. Now... if you’ll excuse me, I need to get some fresh air.”

If he doesn’t follow me, that shoots the second part of this plan to hell. But if I ask him to come with me, he’ll get suspicious. So I trust my instincts, finish my seltzer water, and sashay away towards the back of the club. I don’t risk a glance over my shoulder, no matter how tempting it is. I wait until I’ve left the claustrophobic haze of the club to breathe again.

The alleyway just outside is eerily quiet. It’s also dark enough to encourage all sorts of bad intentions.

Your idea... This was your idea...

I’ve only been standing in the alleyway for a few seconds when the door pushes open and Adrik appears.

I feign annoyance. “What are you doing here?”

“I would never leave you alone in a place like this. You could run into all sorts of dangerous men.”

I purse my lips. “Feels like I already have.”

His eyes are already dilated and his leer is growing more and more pronounced. But surely the drug can't have taken effect already? It's too soon.

Maybe I jumped the gun, came out too fast. At least when we were back at the bar, we were surrounded by people. I had the safety of a crowd.

Out here, shadows are our only company.

"Did I mention how stunning you look in that dress?" Adrik asks.

He steps towards me and I find myself shrinking back. "Adrik. I'm not interested."

"Someone certainly has a high opinion of herself. Just because I compliment you doesn't mean I want to fuck you."

"That's a relief. Can you tell that to your dick?"

He looks down at his crotch and guffaws at the noticeable erection pushing against the front of his pants. "Whoops," he laughs giddily. "Busted."

If I weren't feeling so damn vulnerable right now, I'd have rolled my eyes.

Keep him talking, Em. Just keep him talking.

"Tell me—is mine bigger? Or is his?"

I don't have to fake this roll of my eyes. "Are we literally in a big dick competition now?"

This *has* to be the Venera working its magic. I mean, no way would Adrik have admitted that unless he was under the influence?

"You know that Ruslan and I are basically the same person, right?" he presses.

I cock an eyebrow. "Could've fooled me."

"He just happens to be luckier, that's all. But I assure you, we are the same fucking person."

"Is that why you feel the need to copy everything he does?"

His eyes flash with anger. *Careful, Emma. Toe the line.* “I’m not a copycat. I have a fucking vision for my future. For my empire. And you could be a part of it.”

“You claim not to be a copycat and yet you’re trying to take everything that belongs to him. Doesn’t add up.”

“Are you saying that *you* belong to him?” I tense and he laughs. But it’s not a laugh that’s remotely pleasant. It’s mocking and condescending. The equivalent of dragging broken glass over concrete. “He’s good at convincing people of that, isn’t he? He did the same thing with Jessica, poor thing.”

I thought I was the one pulling the strings here. But it strikes me suddenly that he’s playing the game just as hard. *I might have bitten off more than I can chew.*

“I’m not Jessica.”

He smirks. “You think you mean more to him than she did? Let me tell you something: the *only* difference between you and Jessica is the fact that she was smart enough not to get pregnant. You’re just a pretty incubator for his heir. The moment that baby pops out, you’ll go back to being a nobody.”

Don’t take the bait. Don’t take the bait. Don’t take the—

“That’s not true!”

Dammit.

Adrik just laughs. “Of course it’s true. I’ve known the man a lot longer than you have, Emma. You should be a fucking queen. Not the damn broodmare.”

Gritting my teeth, the words fly out of me with indignation. “I *am* a queen.”

“Really? Where’s the ring then?”

I flinch. “W-what?”

He advances closer. “If he genuinely valued you, if he was really planning on keeping you around after this baby is born, he’d have proposed. He’d have put a ring on your finger and locked you down. Instead...”

Suddenly, *I* feel like the one who’s been drugged. “I... Y-you’re trying to get

in my head...”

He tut-tuts softly. “I’m trying to open your eyes. So open them, Emma! Open them and see that the moment your baby is born, he will abandon you for a woman who can really do things for him. Someone like... well, like Jessica, maybe.”

I cringe back, but I’m running out of room to retreat. The cold brick wall looms at my back, damp and foreboding. “N-no... no, that’s not true—”

“It’s absolutely true. You’ve seen that cow? She’s abhorrent. But everyone puts up with her because she’s loaded. She’s connected. She’s got the ear of one of the most powerful men in the city. She’ll be useful for Ruslan. But you? Your use will be wrung out once your womb is empty.”

I turn away from him. “Stop talking.”

He fixes me with a sympathetic stare that makes me feel pathetic. “Why, my dear? Am I starting to make sense?”

Adrik’s eyes are piercing. They bore into my face, peeling away all that confidence I built up in the past few days leading up to this moment.

“I can offer you more than him, Emma.” The tenor of his voice has changed. It has a strangely smooth quality. When my parents forced Sienna and me to go to Bible camp when we were younger, the counselor there used a voice just like this for the serpent in the Garden of Eden. *Take a bite, Emma. Just one little nibble.*

“Leave me alone,” I mutter.

“Is that really what you want, Emma?” Adrik croons. “You want me to leave you alone—like *he* left you alone?”

I know he’s talking about the club. About tonight. But my mind jumps to the months before now. The day Ruslan decided to believe his doubts over me. All those weeks where he clung to the worst version of me and refused to hear my side of the story.

He *had* left me alone then.

Who’s to say he won’t do the same thing again?

I tunnel through the memories until I get stuck on one: the image of Ruslan lying on a picnic blanket, both Caroline and Reagan sprawled on top of him while Josh laughs.

I take a deep breath. I refocus.

“You’re trying to turn me against him,” I snarl, making eye contact with Adrik. “He’s not the one who’s trying to use me. *You* are.”

He scoffs. “I’m—”

“You may not hate him but you are envious of him, of everything he’s built and everything he’s accomplished. This whole feud between the two of you started when you decided to give in to your inferiority complex.”

His jaw clenches. “I am inferior to *no* man! Least of all *that* motherfucker.”

“Why else would you try so hard to outdo Ruslan? Why else would you try so hard to mimic him? Hell, the moment he was done with Jessica Allens, you swooped in and scooped her up. If that isn’t the move of a desperate man, I don’t know what is.”

“*Desperate?*” He gawks at me. “You think I’m fucking desperate?” He takes a step in my direction and I back right into the rough brick wall that flanks the club. “I’m not fucking desperate. *I’m* the one with the goddamn upper hand!”

His eyes have this vaguely unnatural sheen over them. If I didn’t know better, I’d assume he was high. Although perhaps using Venera isn’t that far off. It’s been long enough now, right? He definitely seems less in control.

It’s ironic to think that I’ve been waiting for this moment since we arrived. But now that it’s here, it doesn’t feel powerful like I imagined. So many things could go wrong. So much hangs in the balance.

Keep your eyes on the ball.

Adrik inches closer. Another step forward and his chest will be pressed against mine. *Too close. Way too damn close.*

Alarm bells are blaring inside my head and panic is starting to rise up my throat like bile. My focus is crumbling under the surge of fear. But he hasn’t

given me anything significant yet and I need to make sure I get something out of him first.

“The upper hand’? How do you figure that? Ruslan is the one with the empire, not you.”

He growls. “Ruslan assumes he thinks of everything. But he wasn’t even able to protect his precious Venera samples on the day of the launch.”

“So you *did* tamper with them?”

He laughs. “It was so fucking easy. Honestly, I didn’t even break a sweat. The great Ruslan Oryolov. He didn’t realize that it was over before it had even begun.”

“You killed innocent people.”

There’s not a shred of remorse on his face. His smile looks manic and he keeps creeping closer and closer towards me.

“I did what I had to do. It’s what any great *pahkan* would do.”

“Except you’re not a *pahkan*.”

He growls, baring his teeth. “I’m whatever the fuck I want to be. And you are gonna be whatever the fuck I want you to be, too.”

A shiver races down my spine. The bile in my throat rises higher. *Focus, Emma. He’s finally talking.* “So your trump card is Sopernik?”

He looks surprised that I’ve mentioned Sopernik at all but he doesn’t question me. “Sopernik is the future. It’s my ticket to greatness.”

“How did you manage to roll it out so fast?”

I’m aware that I’m not being very subtle anymore but that fog over Adrik’s eyes is making me bold. His inhibitions are long gone right now and I intend to take full advantage.

He bends down so low that I get a whiff of his gin breath. *Ugh.* Vomiting-inducing. “I did what I had to do,” he mutters vaguely.

Not good enough.

“Meaning you cut corners?”

He shrugs. “There might be unintended side effects. If a few people die—well, no one’s gonna give a shit. In fact, they’ll be hard-pressed to link it to my product in the first place.”

I shake my head. “You’re a fucking monster.”

“And *you* are starting to piss me off now, little hellcat.”

He grabs my hands suddenly and pins them to the wall. I can already feel the bruises he’s gonna leave on my wrists as he traps me against his body.

Don’t panic. Don’t panic. Don’t—

Too late. I’m panicking.

“No. Adrik. Let... me... go!”

My words are muffled in his heaving, hungry breaths. Venera may lower inhibitions but it certainly doesn’t hinder strength. Adrik feels like a mountain I’m trying to push off me.

“P-please... don’t do this...”

He just growls in my ear. “I’m gonna send you back to him stinking of me. I’m gonna carve my fucking name onto your pussy so that every time he touches you, he’ll know what I did tonight.”

I scream but he clamps his hand over my mouth. The moment he releases my wrist, I swing it forward, whacking the side of his head. But that just pisses him off.

“You fucking cunt! I’m gonna...”

His hand rises. I close my eyes and brace for the blow that I know is coming. And then—

His oppressive weight disappears altogether. Relief floods through me as I open my eyes and realize that I’m not alone anymore.

The cavalry's here.

RUSLAN

It takes all my willpower to keep my leg from bouncing up and down.

But considering I'm not the only one in this VIP room, I need to maintain an air of confidence. I need to keep my shit together.

Which is easier said than done, considering that I can hear the way that bastard is pawing all over my woman and it feels like there's not a damn thing I can do about it.

Kirill seems to believe otherwise, though, because he rounds the coffee table and leans over my shoulder. "Just a few minutes more. She's almost got him right where she wants him."

"Is that wishful thinking?" I snap. "Because it sounds like she's terrified."

"She's playing the part," Kirill says convincingly. "If we bust in there now before he's confessed to anything..."

Our whispering has earned some glances from a few of the other men at the table. Including the massive, beefy president of the Rabid Wolves MC, a motorcycle club infamous for running damn near ninety percent of the drug traffic in the city.

"Be cool, brother," Kirill murmurs. "We've almost got him."

I focus on the tiny device sitting on the table between us, crackling with radio static. "... *you cut corners...*"

I grit my teeth. This is it. I get to my feet, ignoring the fact that Kirill is still breathing down my neck.

“Brother—”

“Give the team a heads-up. They need to be ready to go in the fucking *second* I give the signal.”

“... *No. Adrik. Let... me... go! P-please... don't do this...*”

“Now!” I roar as I burst out of the VIP room and charge towards the back entrance of the club.

By the time I get out into the alleyway, two of my guys have Adrik by the collar while Emma stands pasted to the wall with her arms wrapped around her shivering body. I rush straight to her and gather her up in my embrace.

“You did so fucking great, baby,” I whisper to her. “You did so fucking great.”

She looks up at me timidly, her blue eyes shrouded with a relieved sense of disbelief. Then a tear slips down her cheek.

“Finally remembered her, hm?” Adrik screams at my back. “Because she had forgotten you! I was just about to fuck you out of her system.”

I turn around without warning and slug him in the jaw. He recoils back, but my guys still have a firm grip on him, so he ends up just bobbing in place. His eyes are narrowed with anger but it's obvious that he's under the influence. Even his sweat is charged with testosterone.

“*She wanted me. Your fucking woman came to me.*”

“Do you want me to rearrange your face, *mudak?*”

He snarls and thrashes in the guards' grip. “Get them off me!”

“Oh, I don't think so.” I saunter closer. “Not until we settle a few things. It's about time we put this feud to rest.”

Only then does Adrik seem to realize that this was a setup. “You sicced your bitch on me?”

I ignore the insult. It's much more satisfying to focus on the break in his nose and the blood dribbling down his lips.

"Emma." I hold out a hand to guide her forward.

She steps to my side and reveals the wireless mic that she's been hiding in her cleavage. She drops it in my palm and I show it to Adrik with a satisfied smile.

"Nothing loosens the tongue like Venera," I explain.

Adrik's eyes go wide and hazy. "Y-you... you fucking drugged me?"

"Actually—" Emma steps forward right next to me. "—I did."

"You... you fucking *bitch!*"

My fist smashes into the side of his face for the second time. He careens back before my men haul him back to his feet once more. Now, he's got a split lip in addition to a broken nose. It's only the beginning of what I will do to him if he doesn't bend the fucking knee.

"Say another word to her or about her and I will cut out your tongue myself. Is that understood? You'll rot in a jail cell and you won't even be able to beg for a cup of water."

Adrik looks between us before settling on me. "You're Bratva. Involving the cops is not your style."

"Oh, you think I'm taking this to the cops?" I snort. "Fuck no. I handle my business on my own."

Adrik's eyebrows come together. "Then..."

"You might be interested to know that I was just listening to the feed from this little microphone in one of the VIP rooms upstairs with all your buyers. Not to mention your investors. You know, the ones whose money you bartered away on Sopernik?" Adrik's eyes bulge with horror. "And they weren't the only friends invited to the party. I made sure that Conrad Steel of the Rabid Wolves was there, too."

Beads of sweat are joining the dried blood on Adrik's upper lip.

“The Wolves aren’t exactly known for their forgiving nature, are they?” I continue. “In fact, they insist on exacting their pound of flesh when deals go wrong. I’d say this certainly qualifies, wouldn’t you?”

“You fucking bastard.”

“No, I believe that’s *your* title. My title is *pahkan*,” I snarl. “And don’t you ever fucking forget it again.”

“Y-you can’t do this to me!” Adrik croaks. “You can’t—”

I throw him a disgusted look. “I’m not ‘doing’ anything, *friend*. It’s already done. I don’t even have to deal with you myself—*they* will do it for me. Good luck, Adrik. You’ll need it.”

I grab Emma’s hand and walk her away from Adrik and all his pathetic, wailing desperation. He’s roaring obscenities at my back but I block him out and focus on my woman.

She’s clearly on edge. Her palms are sweaty and the vein on her forehead is jumping around erratically.

“You were amazing.”

That forces her to take a breath. “Yeah? Thought I was gonna throw up most of the night.”

“You seemed so confident.”

“I didn’t want you to think I was chicken,” she whispers. “I wanted... I guess I wanted you to be proud of me.”

I lean in and kiss her hard on the lips. She’s tense, her shoulders still rife with tension. She relaxes only slightly as I kiss her. Probably because she’s as aware as I am that we have an audience.

I pull away and cup her face. “Kirill’s gonna take you home now while I clean up this mess.”

She frowns, her hand snaking around my arm. “You’re not coming back with me?”

“I have to handle things here. You understand, don’t you?”

She chews on her bottom lip but she nods all the same. “Okay. See you at home.”

“And Emma?”

“Hm?”

Her eyes dart to Adrik and then back to me. “The shit he said to you... about Jessica, about what you are to me—”

“It’s okay,” she interrupts quickly. “I... I know they’re not true.”

I nod and she leans up on her tiptoes and presses a kiss to my cheek. Then she allows herself to be led away by Kirill.

Once she’s gone, I’m immediately in a less distracted headspace. I turn to Adrik, savoring this moment. The fucker is hissing and spiting, attempting to get free with pathetic jerking attempts that do nothing more than embarrass him.

“You gonna kill me?” he growls.

I shake my head. “I did consider that. Then I realized that ruining you is so much more poetic.”

“Motherfucker—”

I step forward and the insult dies on his lips. He can pretend all he wants but I can see the fear in his eyes. “You brought this down on your own head, Adrik. Who the fuck told you that you were a match for me?”

His nostrils flare. Sweat and blood mingle together, creating a stench that stinks worse than the bowels of New York City.

“This isn’t over, Ruslan.”

I palm his throat. His life’s pulse flickers against my skin. It’d be so easy to extinguish it. “Don’t push me, Adrik. Our history is the only reason you’re walking away from this with your life. You keep pushing me and I’ll claim that, too. Just like I’ve claimed everything else in your life worth taking.”

“‘Our history’?” he hisses. “How dare you talk to me about *our fucking history* when you don’t even know the half of it!”

I have no idea what he's blabbering about and I'm not sure I want to know. I click my fingers and my men start dragging him out of the alley.

"Wait! Wait! Where are you taking me? Ruslan!"

"Apparently, you're not taking this seriously enough. So maybe a couple of days in my cellar will put things in perspective for you."

His eyeballs pop and spit flies from his mouth. To an extent, I sympathize—it's hard to rein in an ego that size.

"You can lock me up all you want!" Adrik wails. "It won't fucking matter! I'll get out. You think you're such a great fucking *pakhan*. Even your own *vors* aren't loyal to you."

That stops me in my tracks. I hold up my hand and the men dragging Adrik away stop immediately. I walk over to him, letting the force of my eyes burn through his false bravado. "You wanna tell me what that means?"

His jaw clenches. Then it clamps shut altogether.

I snort. "Yeah, I thought so. Get him outta my sight."

"You don't believe me?"

"I believe that you're a desperate fucking coward who's trying to sow discord in my ranks. That's what I believe."

Adrik smiles and something about that smile leaves me feeling uneasy. Before I can let the feeling take over, I turn my back on him and start to walk away.

"How can you expect your *vors* to be loyal," he hisses, "when your own *uncle* is trying to dethrone you?"

I freeze.

I turn slowly on the spot.

One look at his face and I know...

He's not bluffing.

RUSLAN

Vadim Oryolov.

The traitor. The spy. The rat is... Vadim?

It doesn't make any fucking sense. Family is everything to my uncle. It's the reason he endured being passed over as *pahkan*. It's the reason he played the dutiful brother, the supportive uncle. It's the reason he showed up every day even after Fyodor had checked out.

Family is everything.

Those are his words, not mine.

Of course, Adrik could be lying. But I know that's my denial talking. My instincts are screaming a whole different story. They have been since the moment Adrik blurted out the person who's been scheming with him to bring me down.

I had him confined to the smallest room in the cellar. It's cold down here, but if he is looking to me for a blanket or a sweater or a fire, he can keep fucking looking. I've offered him none. Let the bastard freeze his balls off for all I care.

I drag a chair into the cellar room and twist it around to straddle it. Adrik looks up at me from the corner of his thin mattress. He's got his arms wrapped around his legs in an upright fetal position. The moment he stops baring his teeth at me, they start chattering.

He growls furiously and sinks deeper into his corner. “What do you want to know?”

“I want to know *why*.”

“You’ll have to ask him.”

“I’m asking *you*.”

Adrik looks away from me. *Is this loyalty I’m seeing? I didn’t think Adrik knew the meaning of the word.* “Maybe he thought I deserve what you have.”

“What claim do you have?”

“You’d be surprised.”

I roll my eyes. “I never pegged you for one of those annoying cryptic types, Adrik. It doesn’t suit you.”

“Fuck off, Ruslan.”

I inch the chair closer. “Did you approach him or was it the other way around?”

Adrik laughs bitterly. “The betrayal’s really stinging, huh, brother?”

It takes some effort to keep my hands from closing into fists. But I don’t want this piece of shit thinking he’s getting to me. “Betrayal is an inevitable part of this life.”

“But not from your inner circle,” he suggests, rubbing salt in the wound. “Not from *family*. So much for blood being thicker than water, huh?”

I lean in, resting my elbows on my knees. “Answer the question or you’re gonna have a lot more than just a broken nose. Who approached who?”

Adrik sighs wearily, like he’s too exhausted with this shit to even bother lying anymore. “He came to me.”

I have no idea if he’s full of shit or not so I just keep going. “He was the one who told you about Venera?”

He nods. “He didn’t think it would work at first. He was convinced that it

would die an early death. But then initial testing was so positive, he realized that you'd created yourself a goldmine."

I frown. Something about this is not making sense. Vadim would have earned a fortune off Venera, too. I always make sure that my *vors* receive generous cuts of whatever profit we make on any Bratva venture. So why move against me? His motivation can't have just been financial.

Which means—

"It's personal," I mutter to myself.

Adrik flinches. "What?"

I focus on him. "He was the one who tampered with the Venera samples the night of the launch."

Adrik doesn't even have to nod. At this point, all the puzzle pieces are coming together. Sergey's abduction, the botched launch, inside information leaking at every turn... Of course it had to be someone close.

So close that I couldn't fucking see it.

I clamber out of my chair and back out of the cellar. Adrik's eyes go wide as he scrabbles toward me on the mattress. "How long are you gonna keep me here?"

"You should be thanking me. You're under my protection now. The moment I release you, the Wolves will come after you."

"I can take care of myself."

I loft my brow condescendingly. "From where I'm standing, it doesn't seem like it."

Then I slam the cellar door closed and throw the lock. The sound echoes against the spartan cement walls. When I turn around, Kirill is standing against the opposite pillar, eyeing me cautiously. "Everything okay?"

I glance towards the door and gesture for him to follow me upstairs. We exit the shed that serves as the front for the cellar and all the gruesome secrets it's hidden over the years. I can see the bright lights lighting up the facade of the

main house, behind which Emma and the kids are sleeping.

That thought—that they’re here, that they’re safe—is the only thing that comforts me right now.

“Adrik gave up the name of the rat.”

Kirill stops short. “Who is it?”

“Vadim.”

“Yeah, right.” He snorts and slugs me in the shoulder. “Okay, seriously, who is it?”

I don’t crack a smile. I don’t break eye contact. I stare at Kirill and repeat the name. “Vadim.”

Kirill’s smile dies slowly. “Y-you’re sure?”

“It makes sense, doesn’t it? How else could Adrik have known so much so early? How could he have known about Venera or Sergey or Emma or *any* of it? The night of the launch, it was *Vadim* who fucked with the samples. *He* was the one working with Adrik to take me down.”

Kirill looks like his head is about to explode. *I know the fucking feeling.*

“But... *why?*” Kirill murmurs. “He’s your uncle. He’s always been loyal to the Oryolov Bratva. And you *are* the Oryolov Bratva.”

“He’s always resented my position. He’s always hated that he was passed over.”

“Still—”

“I need to go.”

Kirill races after me as I pick up speed. “Where are you going?”

“To deal with this.”

He puts his hand on my shoulder. “Brother—” I flinch away from his touch and he backs off with his hands raised. “I just wonder if confronting him now is the right move.”

“What would you do?”

Kirill frowns. “I would... trap him. Reel him in. Make him talk.”

“That’s how you deal with an enemy you don’t know. This one, I *do* know.”

“Do you?”

He has a point. But I can’t afford to second-guess myself now.

“It’s Saturday,” I remind him. “He’ll be at Fyodor’s.”

Kirill nods uncertainly. “Should I... get a kill team together?”

I shake my head. “I want this done quietly. He may not deserve it but his position earns him some respect. You and I can handle this ourselves.”

RUSLAN

The rage flooding through me feels like it has a life of its own. It still doesn't dissuade me from entering my father's house with Kirill at my side.

Fyodor's housekeeper, Bogdan, is a portly man who's been with the family long past his expiration date. He leads us to the garden room where Fyodor and Vadim are sitting opposite each other in matching armchairs, smoking cigars and drinking scotch.

"Ruslan!" Vadim blurts the moment he sees me. "This is a surprise."

Fyodor glances up, his brow crinkling. "Has something happened?"

It's a fair question. I'm not in the habit of stopping by for casual visits unless there's a damn good reason. And I've never crashed one of their Saturday night meetings. It's been a tradition since the accident, one of the few things that Fyodor does without having to be forced.

That's when it hits me.

This *isn't* just between Vadim and me.

Once I've exposed his betrayal, it will affect everyone. *Especially* my father.

"May we join you for a moment?" I ask with stiff formality.

The two older men exchange a glance. "Judging from the looks on your faces," Vadim says as his eyes skitter between me and Kirill, "this is not a social call."

I take the only remaining seat between the two brothers. Kirill remains standing. “You’re right about that, Uncle.”

I flinch. It hurts to say. *Uncle*. It’s a title that means something. It has weight. Responsibility. And this motherfucker has smiled at my face for years, supported me openly day after day—and, all the while, plotted against me.

Who knows? Maybe it started long before Adrik. Maybe Adrik was nothing but a pawn in Vadim’s game.

“What’s going on, son?” Fyodor asks. “Is the family okay?”

“No,” I intone. “The family’s not okay.”

Fyodor recoils with concern. Even Vadim has the audacity to look worried. It’s so damn convincing that it floors me. Even now, he keeps lying.

“Emma and the kids?” Fyodor almost chokes. “Where are they? What happened?”

That snaps me out of it. When he said “family,” he was thinking of my *new* family. “No. No, Emma and the kids are alright. This is not about them.”

Fyodor eases. Vadim, on the other hand, stiffens.

“What is it about then?”

My gaze slides pointedly to my uncle. “I have Adrik in custody.”

Now that I know what Vadim really is, I can see all the little telltale signs that give him away. It’s a marvel I didn’t notice them before. The twitch of his mouth, the nervous tic in his foot, the way he keeps wiping his sweaty palms against the leg of his pants.

“You didn’t inform us that you were going to run an operation against him,” says Vadim.

“I don’t have to inform anyone of anything,” I growl. “I am the *pahkan*.”

He flinches. “Yes, of course. I wasn’t disputing that—”

“No, but you are opposed to it. Aren’t you?”

The silence is prickly with tension. It feels as though I've just charged the room and now, we're all waiting for things to go *boom*.

It's Fyodor who breaks the silence. "Ruslan, my son, I don't know what's going on, but accusing your uncle is not—"

"Why don't you ask him yourself, Otets? Ask him if he thinks I should be the *pahkan*."

Fyodor doesn't hesitate. "That's ridiculous. He has supported you completely from the moment you donned the mantle. He has been loyal, faithful—"

"Tracherous."

I've never seen Fyodor look more afraid. Not since we buried Mother, at least. His eyes dart between me and his brother, his hands are shaky, and his brow is dotted with beads of perspiration.

"I will not sit here and let you run down my brother's—"

"*Brat*." Vadim doesn't raise his voice but the way that Fyodor stops short makes it seem like he screamed.

"What is Ruslan talking about?" my father asks desperately. "What is the meaning of all this?"

"Tell him, Uncle," I growl. "Tell him how you and Adrik have been working together for fuck knows how long to bring me down."

The silence hurts. Vadim doesn't so much as breathe. Fyodor's eyes go wide but he doesn't take them off my uncle. "Deny it, brother. Tell me what he's saying is wrong."

I can appreciate the desperation on Fyodor's face. Discovering his betrayal has destroyed me, too, and I'm not nearly as close to Vadim as Fyodor is.

"Vadim!" Fyodor roars, raising his voice for the first time in recent memory.

Vadim closes his eyes. "I can't deny it," he says softly. "I won't."

Fyodor's mouth drops. His entire face sags under the weight of that admission. He's aging ten, twenty, thirty years in the blink of an eye.

“No... no. This can't be true.”

“It is, Otets.”

“*Why?*” Isn't that the question of the fucking day? “You, who have always, *always* championed family over all else. You, who have always believed that family is everything. You've been working against my son. Against your *pahkan*.”

Vadim nods. An air of detached resignation clings to his sagging shoulders. As ancient as my father looks, Vadim looks plenty old himself. He stubs out the cigar in the ashtray and sighs. “As always, you've gone straight to the point, brother. Because the truth is, *he*—” His eyes dart viciously toward me. “—was *never* supposed to be *pahkan*, was he?”

Fyodor's frown turns down at the corners. “This is about that.”

“Of course this is about *that!*” His tone is whip-sharp and dripping with the resentment he's been suppressing all these years. “Do you remember the months after Leonid and Alina died?”

Fyodor flinches violently. “Don't—”

“You wanted to know why. I'm telling you,” Vadim snarls. “You lost your wife and son and you fell to pieces. A true *pahkan* would never have let that destroy him. But you... you were weak. But despite that weakness, you were the elder brother, the rightful *pahkan*, so I followed you. I supported you. I made it so that no one knew how far you'd fallen or how little you wanted to wear the crown. I led for you and gave you the credit. The reason the Oryolov Bratva still exists today is because *I* saved it.” His hands are balled into fists and his voice is trembling from the weight of his emotion. “You knew the burden you'd placed on me even at that time. Which is why you promised to hand over power to me. ‘*You're the real pahkan, brother. You should lead them, not me.*’ Those were your words. Or do you deny it?”

There are tears in Fyodor's eyes now. “I do not.”

Vadim nods with grim satisfaction. “You promised to turn the reins over to me—and then what did you do? You changed your mind and—without warning, without so much as a conversation—you announced that your twenty-one-year-old son would take over as *pahkan*.”

Fyodor's looking down now, so I have no idea what he's thinking. Hell, I probably wouldn't have any idea even if he was looking right at me.

"You're right, brother," Fyodor whispers. "You're right about everything. I did promise to make you my successor."

Kirill is staring at me in shock. I just shake my head.

"Tell me: what changed your mind?" Vadim demands. "Why did you choose the boy over the man? After everything I had done to take care of you and your Bratva..."

Fyodor raises his head. There's a wealth of emotion in his eyes and I can only pick out some. Sadness, definitely. Anger, yes. Regret, perhaps?

"The truth?"

Vadim's eyes teeter to mine for only a moment before he wrenches them back to Fyodor. "Yes, the truth. It's the least you can do for me now."

Fyodor sighs. "At the end of the day... he is my son."

Fuck. I'm not sure if it's a terrible reason or the best one yet. I suppose it depends on which side of fatherhood you're on.

Vadim nods. "I didn't understand then. But I suppose, now, I do."

I frown. "Why?"

"What do I always say?" he asks.

"Family is everything."

He nods. "Exactly. Family is everything. I have always believed that and I always will." A chill spreads through me as I start to put together the last piece of the puzzle.

How can I have been so damn blind?

"You chose your son, brother," Vadim explains to Fyodor. "And I chose mine."

"Adrik," I whisper.

Kirill's mouth is hanging open and Fyodor looks completely floored. "N-no," Fyodor stammers. "That's not possible. We knew his parents. Elisa and Gustav were friends."

Vadim chuckles darkly. "They were *your* friends. I guess you could say that I was a lot closer to Elisa than I was to Gustav."

"*Blyat*,'" Fyodor croaks. "All these years... you had a son..."

"I didn't find out myself until the boy was a teenager. Elisa told me just before the cancer took her. Gustav had already been gone for years. The boy had only me."

"You should have told me."

"Why?" Vadim scowls. "So you could turn my only son into your son's stooge, just like you did to me? I wanted more for him than to play second fiddle. I didn't want him to live in someone else's shadow his entire life like I have."

Both brothers are glaring at each other now. It's strange to see two old men, both closer to the ends of their lives than the beginnings, with so much hate and sorrow in their hearts.

Vadim clears his throat. "When it came down to it, you chose your son over me. I did the same. You can't fault me for that."

"Actually, I can," I spit, getting to my feet.

Vadim watches me rise. I have no idea if all that calm is coming from confidence or if he's simply play-acting like he has been from the beginning.

"Are you going to kill me, nephew?"

"I haven't decided yet."

I glance at Kirill and give him a decided nod. He doesn't stride forward the way he normally would. This time, he's slow and uncertain, checking the pulse of the room as he approaches the man who betrayed us all.

"Ruslan, wait," Fyodor protests, turning his somber eyes on me. "Let's talk about this."

“There’s nothing to talk about. He betrayed me. He betrayed the Bratva. When it comes down to it, he betrayed you, too.”

“Yes, but—”

“No buts,” I snap fiercely. “There is no coming back from this.” I make sure I look my father in the eyes when I tell him what he already knows. “There is no saving him.”

A tear slips down Fyodor’s eye. “He is my brother...”

I clench my jaw and push away the storm of feelings roaring in the middle of my chest. “And I am the *pahkan*. Kirill, take him in.”

Kirill grabs hold of Vadim’s arm and pulls him up to his feet. He disarms him quickly, gives him one final patdown, and then leads him out of the room. Vadim doesn’t say a word. He doesn’t struggle or fight. He simply allows Kirill to lead him away.

I sit down in front of my father so that I’m at eye level with him. He seems to have shrunk in the last few minutes. Fear rips through me. The last time I saw him look this broken was when he first got the news about Mother and Leonid. And if Vadim isn’t here to hold him together now... what will happen?

“He’s been a good brother,” he whispers in a broken, quiet voice.

“If you’re asking me to spare him—”

“I’m not asking that.” He takes a deep breath. “I... I don’t know what I’m asking.” He lifts his gaze to mine. Every new line on his face seems to spell regret. “I should have seen this coming.”

“He played his part well.”

“It can’t have *all* been a lie.”

“In my experience, it’s all or nothing.”

His jaw trembles and tears start streaming down his cheeks. All the life I saw in him in the days after I introduced him to Emma and the kids seems to sag out of him. I rest my hand on his shoulder, trying to draw him out of the dark

hole he's slipping into.

"For now, he'll be imprisoned. But I will make sure he's comfortable," I promise.

"It's your decision," he says reluctantly. "As you said, you are the *pahkan*."

"This betrayal has hurt me, too, father."

He shrugs my hand away. "Leave me now."

I get to my feet, wondering if leaving him alone right now is the right thing to do. The only person who can give me advice is the one man I can't trust anymore.

I leave my father's house but once I'm in my car, I can't bring myself to drive back home. If I go home, Emma will be waiting for me, expecting an explanation. How can I give her one when I don't have the answers myself?

Fyodor and Vadim have always been close. Through the worst of times, they stuck it out together. It was a relationship I hadn't thought twice about until after I'd lost Leonid. Then I'd watched both brothers with a distinct pang of envy.

That was the kind of love I understood. It was the kind of love I could get on board with.

But now? If it was all a lie... what did any of it mean?

When my car phone starts ringing, I nearly jerk out of my seat. I press accept and Kirill's voice comes in. "He's been situated in a cell across from Adrik. I made sure he was comfortable."

I've never once questioned Kirill's loyalty. Even tonight, he did everything I asked of him. And yet I find myself wondering if there will come a time when Kirill feels the need to act independently. Will there ever be a day, perhaps when he grows disillusioned with my leadership, when he would decide to forge his own path and set mine on fire?

"Ruslan? You there?"

"Yeah. I'm here."

“Man... I’m sorry. Just go home, okay? Be with Emma. I’m sure you’ll feel better in the morning.”

But the words sound insane to my ear. *Go home? Feel better?* This is not the kind of feeling you can just sleep off. Drink away—maybe.

“I can’t go home,” I rasp. “I need... a distraction. I need a fucking drink.”

RUSLAN

It takes a lot of alcohol before my feelings check out for the night. But once the numbness kicks in, it's easier to stop counting the drinks and just knock them back without reservation.

It's past three in the morning but I have no intention of going home yet. Partly because I don't want to face reality. And partly because I have no desire for Emma to see me like this.

Kirill's been drinking most of the night, too, but not nearly as much as me. I'm pretty sure he's been throwing the drinks over his shoulder for the last hour when he thinks I'm not looking. He's been watching me when he thinks I'm not looking, too, though he keeps denying it. Motherfucker thinks that just because I'm drunk, I don't notice shit.

I notice everything. I just don't *feel* anything anymore.

And honestly?

It's fucking heaven.

One of the Alcaraz waitresses approaches with another tray of drinks. She's brunette and pretty, fit, curvy. A year ago, she would have been just my type.

But there's no such thing as a "type" for me anymore. There is only *one*. A blue-eyed *kiska* with my baby in her womb.

"Can I get you anything?" the brunette asks me. "Another drink?"

“I think he’s had enough,” Kirill interjects.

“I’ll tell you when I’ve had enough and I haven’t fucking had enough. You —” I glare at the brunette who flinches under my gaze. “—how long have you been working for me?”

She doesn’t flinch at that one, so clearly, she knows exactly who I am. “Three months, sir.”

“Hm. Keep the drinks coming. If not, you’re fired.”

She gulps and scurries away and Kirill turns to me with a weary sigh on his lips. “Listen, man, I know you’re going through a crisis here—”

“Not in the mood, Kirill.”

“—But you have a family to get home to.”

For some reason, the reminder pisses me off. *Family*. What a fucking word. I come from a broken one. A dead, dying, broken-to-shit family. And he thinks that I can just leave that all behind and start fresh with a new one? Like I won’t bring that poison right along with me?

Hell no. I’m not good enough for them. Not for Emma and not for those kids. I’d only ruin them.

Case in point: didn’t I promise Josh that I would never be like his father? And yet here I am, dealing with my problems by getting shitfaced.

Just like fucking Ben.

“Listen, we can leave now,” Kirill suggests. “Get you about a gallon of water. Put you to bed. You can sleep away the hangover and be good as new tomorrow.”

“You need to stop talking.”

He backs off reluctantly and I sit there and chug my way through another tray of drinks before I finally start to hit my limit.

And by “limit,” I mean I’ve drunk so much that I’ve crossed the line from blissfully numb to painfully aware of things that aren’t even here in the room with me. Questions demanding answers.

Is anything real?

Can you ever really know a person?

And if you can't, then how can you trust them?



I don't really remember getting back to the estate. One moment, I'm in the club; the next, I'm surrounded by familiarity. Paintings I picked out. Carpets I had flown in.

And Emma's face, staring up at me, looking slightly bewildered, definitely worried.

"Ruslan?"

"He's drunk, Em." Kirill's voice feels like it's coming from a distance. Is he far behind me? Or is he just talking softly? My head is throbbing so hard that I don't bother finding out.

"Let's just get him to bed. He'll explain later."

Those beautiful blue eyes connect with mine. Everything gets a little clearer, a little brighter. I feel her warmth wrap around me as she gives me her shoulder to lean on and twists me towards our bedroom.

"Are you okay?"

No.

"I don't wanna talk."

She flinches beneath me. "Ruslan, I'm worried—"

I tear away from her and put some distance between us. She's worried about *me*? Fuck that. I'm not a damn charity case. I'm Ruslan fucking Oryolov and no one has ever needed to worry about me.

"You don't need to worry about me," I growl derisively. "I'm a grown man. I can take care of myself."

Something flashes across her eyes. Something that looks a lot like anger. “Really? Because Kirill practically carried you into the house. The sun’s about to rise, Ruslan. Were you out all night drinking?”

I scowl at her. “I’m a grown man. I’ll stay out all night doing whatever the fuck I want.”

I’m aware that my voice is getting louder, but somehow, I can’t seem to control it. Emma’s eyes are wide. She’s looking at me as though she can barely recognize me.

That look really gets under my fucking skin.

You don’t deserve her.

You don’t fucking deserve any of this.

“No,” she says softly. “No, you don’t get to do whatever the fuck you want anymore, Ruslan. You have responsibilities now. You have to think of more than just yourself.”

“You realize that, in order to be a nagging wife, I have to ask you to marry me first, right?”

I hear her shocked gasp and that’s when I silently repeat the words I’ve just thrown at her. *Blyat*. Did I just say that? I feel like a puppet. Like someone else is using my voice without my consent.

I close my eyes. Open them again. She’s still there, staring at me like I’ve grown a second head. “I didn’t mean... Listen, my head is throbbing. I need to... lie down...”

She speaks so softly that I almost don’t hear her over the sound of my migraine. “I don’t like this version of you.”

Yeah? That makes two of us.

“Ruslan, I can see you’re in pain.”

She should be running from me. She should want nothing to do with me. So why is she still here, trying to take care of me?

“I’m fine.”

“You’re clearly not.”

She tries to touch me but I flinch from her. “Go back to bed, Emma.”

“Come with me.”

“I need to be by myself.”

“What you need is—”

“What the hell makes you think *you* know what I need?” I demand, practically spitting at her. “I’m the fucking *pahkan*. I’m the fucking boss. Who the hell are you?”

She grits her teeth, her blue eyes flashing. “I am your partner. I’m the mother of your children.”

“I’ve got news for you: ‘partner’ is still not ‘wife.’ And only *one* of those kids is mine.”

Three distinctive little gasps follow my words. I freeze on the spot, my eyes veering towards the open door down the corridor, where three pairs of wide eyes are staring at me with obvious hurt.

What the fuck have I done?

Why the fuck did I say what I said?

Josh grabs the girls and reels them back into the room. The slam of the door feels painful. It hits me right in the chest—right where my fucking heart ought to be.

I force myself to turn back to her. She shakes her head at me, but she doesn’t say a word. It feels like a test. And not one I can pass.

So instead, I shake my head. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“No. You shouldn’t have.”

“I can fix this. I just... I can’t go in like this.” I look down at myself and feel a wave of disgust. “I can’t talk to them in this state.”

She still doesn’t speak. I can’t meet her eyes anymore. The last few minutes

have eaten away the alcohol in my bloodstream. And everything is starting to hurt again.

“I’m sorry...” I mumble.

I don’t even sound sincere. I sound like a miserable drunk.

And perhaps it’s that realization that has me spinning around, turning towards the staircase. I should stay and deal with the consequences of my words, my actions. But instead, I run.

Like a man who’s so afraid of getting hurt that he decides to be the first to cause it.

EMMA

“Josh, sweetheart, you need to eat something.”

His eyes rise to mine but it’s like he’s looking through me, not at me. “I’m not hungry.”

“You didn’t eat anything all day yesterday,” I say, pushing some toast towards him. “Just one piece. For me. Please?”

He blinks and turns away from the toast. “I’m going outside.”

“Josh, honey—”

He’s gone before I can think of more hollow words of comfort to throw at him. Honestly, it’s worse than watching the girls. At least they cried it out yesterday. But Josh?

He’s gone practically catatonic on me.

I contemplated calling Dr. Alicia in for an emergency session. The only reason I didn’t is because Josh stopped me before I could even start dialing. He put his hand on my arm and shook his head from side to side without even saying a word. And because I didn’t want to add to his anxiety, I listened.

I wonder if that was the right choice.

I glance over at the girls. They were quiet after they finished crying yesterday and apparently, that isn’t gonna change this morning. Both of them are picking at their cornflakes with muted disinterest.

“Rae, Caro—finish your cereal, guys. You love Frosted Flakes.”

Reagan scrunches up her nose and lets go of her spoon. It plops forlornly into the pool of milk. “I want to go outside, too.”

Sighing, I nod. I’d let them get away with murder right now if that’s what it takes to make them feel even one percent better. Reagan trots off after Josh but Caroline stays in her seat, watching as her siblings wander over to the fountain framed through the window.

“Do you wanna join them, sweetheart?”

She shakes her head silently. I had a talk with them yesterday. I made excuses for Ruslan. I told them he didn’t mean what he said. That he was tired, and under pressure, and that he wasn’t himself when he said it. I told them that once he cleared his head, he would come and talk to them. He would apologize.

He would stop being such a total fucking asshole.

That last part was more of a silent addition that I’d tacked on in my head. It was definitely implied, though.

“Auntie Em?”

“Yes, sweetheart?”

Caroline turns her bright eyes on me. I’m not used to seeing her so somber. It makes me shiver all the way down to the bone. “Why hasn’t he come to see us yet?”

“I... I’m sure—” I stop short the moment I realize that I’m *not* sure. Truthfully, I have no idea what Ruslan will do. And I have no idea when he’ll do it. I saw a different man in his eyes when he said those horrible things and it scared me to my core.

“I don’t know, my love. I wish I did.”

Her face crumples up and she pushes away her bowl of cereal. “I’m not hungry, either. May I be excused?”

I bite the inside of my cheek hard enough to taste blood. “Of course.”

She scurries off, but not towards the gardens like I expect. She heads upstairs to her bedroom. I leave the breakfast nook and storm towards Ruslan's office.

Break my heart—fine.

Break theirs?

Un. Fucking. Forgivable.

The office door looms large at the end of the hallway. He's been hiding out there since he came back home hammered out of his mind. I've pegged him for a lot of things, but never a coward.

What the hell happened? I want to scream. Explain yourself!

But I also find myself thinking, does it even matter? Life is hard. People are awful. Shit's gonna happen. He doesn't get to lash out at me and the kids every time something goes wrong for him. It's not fair.

It's not exactly a conscious decision but suddenly, I find myself turning away from Ruslan's office and picking up my cell phone to call someone else instead.

It's a quick conversation, but I get what I want immediately. As soon as I hang up, I race upstairs and start packing. I only bring the essentials—Sienna's music box goes in first, of course—for myself and Josh. When I go into the girls' room to prepare bags for each of them, I find Caroline lying on the bed with her face buried in a pillow.

“Sweetheart?” I whisper. She lifts her head reluctantly. “What would you say to leaving the estate for a bit?”

She lifts her eyebrows and nods slowly. “Okay...”

I offer her the strongest smile I can. It's not much, but it's something. “Good. Go get your brother and sister.”



“Emma?”

Dammit!

I gesture for the kids to get in the car before I turn to face Kirill. His eyes are fixed on the large duffel bag slung off my shoulder.

“Where’d you come from?”

“I was in the shed... just getting a few things organized. Are you going somewhere?”

“For at least a few days—yes.”

“Does Ruslan know?”

I grit my teeth. “No, and he doesn’t need to. Not that he would care either way.”

Kirill’s eyebrows slope downward. “Em, I don’t know what happened between the two of you after I left but—”

“He told me and the children that we weren’t important to him. Among other things. And he’s right, in theory. I’m *not* his wife and Josh, Caroline and Reagan *aren’t* his children.”

Kirill’s eyes go wide. “Bullshit. He didn’t say that.”

“He did. And I have three little witnesses,” I snap, glancing back at the car. All three of their faces are pressed up against the window, watching carefully.

“Goddammit, Ruslan,” Kirill mutters to himself. He shakes his head and looks up at me. “So the two of you didn’t talk? He didn’t tell you what happened?”

“He was more interested in pushing me away. And guess what? It worked. Feel free to congratulate him on a job well done next time you see him.”

“Listen, Emma, shit went down the night we took Adrik in. Ruslan found out some stuff that really fucked with his head.”

I hold up a hand to stop him. “And if he’d just been honest with me, I would have understood, no matter what it was. Hell, even *after* he said what he said, I would have forgiven him—if he’d only asked for it. The kids would have, too. But it’s been almost two days and all we’ve gotten from him is radio

silence. Which means that everything he said, he meant.”

“I know for a fact he didn’t.”

I shrug. “Then why hasn’t he *said* so, hm? Why hasn’t he tried to make it right? Why has he disappeared on me and the kids when we need him the most?”

Kirill’s mouth opens but nothing comes out. I nod grimly, feeling the weight of the last day settle over me. “I’m done making excuses for him, Kirill. Especially to the kids. They don’t deserve this. They already had one nightmare of a dad; they don’t need another one. I’ll be damned if I let Ruslan hurt them like Ben did.”

Kirill grabs my arm when I try to turn away. “Ruslan’s not Ben, Emma. You know that.”

“I used to. Then he proved me wrong.”

“He’s going through something…”

“I’m gonna stop you right there. We’re all going through something, Kirill. All of us. But the answer is not to shut out all the people that care about you. That’s a pretty good way to lose them.”

“Just let me get him—”

“Don’t,” I say fiercely. “He’s made it very clear: we’re not important to him. Let’s just leave it at that. Those kids have been through enough.”

His face falls but he doesn’t stop me from getting into the car. He just stands there miserably while we drive away. The kids watch as the house gets smaller and smaller before it finally disappears in the distance.

I hate that they have to say goodbye to another home.

“It’s gonna be okay, guys,” I tell them. “I promise.”

But I have no right to promise them anything.

I’m just as lost as they are.

RUSLAN

Forty-eight hours have passed. The alcohol and the hangover have both had their way with me. But the guilt...

That shit lingers.

I've never had to explain myself before. I've never had to apologize. But she deserves that much at the very least. They all do.

Except when I walk into our bedroom to do it, the air feels strange. The room looks different, too. It takes me a long, stupefied moment to realize that Emma's slippers are no longer by the foot of the bed. Her favorite bathrobe is gone. All her books. All her clothes.

Dread rips through me as I turn towards the mantelpiece in search of the music box.

It's gone.

I rush into the kids' room and it's the same story there. I can still see the indents of Reagan's feet on the carpet. They're gone—that much is undeniable. But who took them? Where? When? It's not like she has a place to—

I twist around when Kirill walks in. One look at his face and I know something's up.

“Tell me what you know,” I order. “Where the fuck are they?”

“They went back to the penthouse,” he admits. “They left about an hour ago.”

“Why the hell didn’t you stop them? Or call me?”

He fixes me with a glare that I’m not used to having aimed at me. “Is it true what you said to them?”

That guilt leaps up in my throat to strangle me from within. “I was drunk, Kirill. And stupid. And an asshole.” I sigh deeply. “I didn’t realize the kids were listening.”

“Why would you even say shit like that to any of them?” he demands.

“Did you not hear what I just said?”

He shakes his head sadly. “You love Emma and you love those kids. So why are you sabotaging your own happy ending?”

I don’t know how to answer that, so I just don’t even bother trying.

Kirill looks both crushed for me and disgusted with me at the same time. “You should have begged for her forgiveness a lot sooner than this.”

“I know that,” I rasp, chin falling to my chest.

“So why didn’t you?”

My hand is balled into a fist. Even though my anger is aimed at Kirill, I know that he’s not the one I want to punch. I’d need a mirror for that.

“Because... I know the damage I’ve done. And I didn’t want to face it.”

“Burying your head in the sand isn’t going to do shit, brother. It’s only gonna make everything worse.”

I nod and head for the door.

“Where are you going?” he calls after me.

“Where do you think? I’m gonna go get my family back.” I stop abruptly at the threshold and turn to Kirill. “Oh—and as for Adrik, you can release him.”

Kirill’s eyes pop open with shock. “Say that again?”

“I’m not gonna kill him. But I’m not gonna protect him anymore, either. He can fuck off wherever he wants—sooner or later, the Rabid Wolves will find him. Word is, they’ve already started looking.”



The guard behind the security desk gives me a tight frown. “The security code was changed forty minutes ago, sir. But I can call up to the penthouse and request access for you.”

I nod. “Do it.”

Request forgiveness while you’re at it.

He dials in the connection number and hands me the phone. Then he has the good sense to fuck off while I put the phone to my ear.

“Hello?”

It’s Caroline. My heart is beating fast. Is this what real nerves feel like? Because it’s goddamn awful. “Hey Caro, it’s me. Ruslan.”

For a moment, I think she hung up on me. But then I hear the sound of her breathing.

“Caroline, *malyshka*, can you let me in?”

There’s a beat of silence. Then: “No.”

“Caroline—

“You were *mean*,” she says emphatically. “If you didn’t want to be our dad, then you should have just said.”

I’m torn between laughing and falling to fucking pieces. Raked over the coals by a child—I deserve nothing less.

“You’re right. But we can’t talk about this through the phone. Can you please put your aunt on? I need to talk to you guys in person, face to—”

I hear the phone change hands, but the voice on the other side is not Emma’s.

“I’m mad at you.” It’s Reagan now. Even the little one is pissed off and as much as it hurts me that I’ve hurt her, I’m also proud that she’s speaking up about it.

“You have every right to be.”

Her little voice quivers. “You made us all cry.”

I must have a heart after all, I think to myself. Because I’m pretty sure it’s breaking right now.

“Rae, please let me explain. I never meant to hurt any of you—”

“Then why did you?”

Except I’m not speaking to Reagan anymore. The phone has changed hands once again while I was speaking. Now, the voice is slightly lower, slightly deeper, but still just as pained.

“Josh.”

It took so long to earn his trust. We spent months forging a bond that I managed to screw up in a matter of seconds.

“You lied to me.” His voice feels suddenly so much more mature. It feels like I’m talking to a teenager. A man in the making. “You lied to all of us. You told me you would never be like my dad. You promised me.”

Crack, crack, crack, go the last pieces of my heart.

“Can you please let me up there so we can talk about this?”

“No.”

“Josh—”

There’s noise on the other side and I have a feeling the phone’s changing hands again. It’s like a revolving door of consequences.

“Ruslan.”

I exhale. “Emma, can we talk?”

“You really hurt them, Ruslan.”

“I know. I know I hurt you, too. Just let me up there so that I can explain what happened.”

“Why didn’t you just explain back then?” she whispers. “I was right there, asking—*begging*—to carry half the burden.”

“I know. I’m just... I’m not used to that.”

“So you pushed me away. Again.”

I wince. “I... yes. That’s what I did.”

“I’m too old for this, Ruslan. Come to think of it, so are you. I think I’ve proved that I’m in this for the long haul. I just don’t think you are. And that’s a problem because it’s not just me. It’s about my kids, too.”

“I was in a bad headspace yesterday—”

“How?” she demands. “We got Adrik. That’s what you wanted, right? We got Adrik and you didn’t have to kill him. The plan worked.”

“It worked. You did so good. But things happened after you left. I was—I *am*—trying to keep you safe from it all.”

“Maybe you should look into a way to keep me safe from *you*. Because that’s the wound that hurts the most right now.”

I glance up to find the security guard staring at me with open curiosity. He glances away the moment we make eye contact.

“Please, Emma.” I sigh. “Just let me up.”

Her breath whistles out, low and mournful. “I know that you probably think you have a good reason for what you said, what you did. But the fact is, no matter what the reason, those kids will never be able to unhear those words. I need to think of *them* now. I need to think of our future.”

“Emma—”

She ignores me. “You and me, we’ve been in this sort of blissful in-between lately. You told me you wanted to be with me and I was happy to go along with whatever that meant because it felt so good to be with you. But the truth is, you don’t think of me as your partner. You think of me as an ornament.

An accessory. An incubator. And like you reminded me yesterday, none of those things translate to *wife*.”

I squeeze the phone and lean in like it'll help her hear me better. “I was so drunk, Emma. You can't take what I said seriously.”

“Adrik said pretty much the same thing, Ruslan. And I chose not to believe him. But then, when you said what you said—”

“You don't have to be married to me to be important to me, Emma.”

“Then why do I need to be married to you in order to ask questions or demand explanations? I can't have expectations of you without a ring on my finger? I can't *rely* on you?”

She sighs and I can hear the fatigue in her voice. She's pregnant; she's supposed to be keeping her blood pressure low. And here I am, messing it up for her already.

Ruining my baby's life before the child is even born.

“How am I supposed to believe all the things you've said to me and the kids before now? I can't, Ruslan. And I can't afford to expose the kids to another father figure who doesn't really want to be their father.”

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!

Say something, you dumb, mute bastard. Fix it. Fucking FIX IT.

“So for now, I'm gonna stay here with the kids. I need some space. And they need to heal. Please listen to that. Please respect it.”

How can I respect it when it goes against my very nature? She's pulling away from me, threatening to take the kids with her, and she expects me to give her fucking *time*? Fucking *space*?

The caveman in me is beating his fists against his chest with rage. This is *not* happening.

But then I replay Reagan's sad little voice in my head. I hear Caroline and Josh's devastated words. This is not about me.

This is about them.

The more I push, the more resistance I'll get in return. *Some battles are fought in silence.* Fyodor used to say that often to Leonid and me.

"Okay," I agree at last. "I'll respect it."

"Thank you."

The line goes dead. It feels like I'm swimming against the tide. The harder I swim, the stronger the currents become. It's my own damn fault. *I'm* the one who's stoked those currents. *I'm* the one who took a lighter to my own life.

But I'm determined to make it right. I have no clue how. But I know one thing—I'm coming back for Emma and the kids.

I'm coming back for what's mine and nothing will stop me.

Not even them.

EMMA

Seven days.

That's how long it's been since I've seen or spoken to Ruslan.

And, God help me... *I miss him.*

The kids do, too. They've been moping around the penthouse for the last week. Not even the gifts that come daily seem to cheer them up. They're all smart enough to know when they're being bribed.

Every time we get another delivery, I want to scream. As thoughtful as his gifts are, they're also insulting. Does he really think he can *buy* our forgiveness? He should have showed up every single freaking day until we relented and let him up here.

I know that's not what I asked him for. I asked him for space and that's what he's giving me. But isn't he smart enough to know the difference between what I *say* and what I *want*?

Honestly.

Men.

"Caroline, how's the reading going?"

"Fine," she mumbles unenthusiastically.

Their new school encourages the kids to do half an hour of reading every day.

Since they don't have a big lawn to run around in anymore, I've designated the evenings for reading time. We all pick a different book, gather in the living room with a bunch of snacks, and read together.

It started off as a flimsy attempt to give the kids a distraction as well as a sense of togetherness. But it's worked out surprisingly well. Although I'm pretty sure Josh spends more time in his own head than in his book.

"J? What about you?"

He puts his book down and shrugs. Then he looks out the window as though he'd rather be anywhere else.

Sighing, I give up on my own book, too. He's had three therapy sessions this week and it's only Thursday. I'm actually thinking of calling Alicia in for another session on Saturday if his mood doesn't pick up soon.

I have half a mind to hide the gifts that Ruslan sends over. Maybe they're the cause of Josh's perpetually bad mood.

The one thing none of us can resist is the fresh food that Ruslan has delivered to the apartment every evening. Now that I'm officially out of my first trimester and my morning sickness has passed, my appetite is annoyingly healthy. It's almost six, which means there should be a delivery coming at any moment.

"You hungry?" I ask Josh hopefully.

"No."

I glance at the girls. "What about you two?"

"No," says Reagan, with a sly glance at Josh as if we won't notice that she's just saying what he's saying. Then she adds, "... but I hope we get pasta tonight."

How easily kids fall into new routines. It would have been amusing if the whole situation weren't so freaking sad.

"Josh, honey, we need to talk."

He shakes his head. "I don't want to talk."

“Tough. It’s happening.”

He does a double-take in my direction at the sudden tone shift. I’ve been really gentle with all of them this past week. It’s not working. Time for a new plan.

I set my book down on my lap and lean forward. “I know this is hard, kiddos, and I know you’re hurting, but it’s time to get your game face on. We can’t be sad forever.”

The girls rush towards me. Reagan gets on my lap and Caroline snuggles into my side. “Joshie misses Ruslan,” Caroline explains.

“Do *not*.”

Caroline pulls back. “You don’t miss him?” she asks innocently. “Not even a little?”

Josh glances at me self-consciously and my heart twists into a painful knot. “I miss him, honey, and I don’t think I should be ashamed to admit that. Neither should you.”

Josh crosses his hands over his chest. “He doesn’t care about us, so why should we care about him?”

“He does care about us,” Reagan insists, pointing at all the unboxed gifts in the corner of the living room. “He sent all those to us!”

Josh grunts. “That doesn’t count.”

Reagan looks confused. She’s still young enough to believe that presents are the ultimate gesture of love. I kiss the top of her head and remember a time when Josh was that young and naïve, too.

“Do you think that maybe we should give him a chance to explain?” I suggest.

Reagan nods immediately. “I think so.”

Caroline takes a little longer but in the end she nods as well. “Only if he promises to be nice to everyone,” she tacks on.

I turn my gaze on Josh. “What about you?”

He looks between all three of us, chewing on his bottom lip the entire time. “I... don’t know.”

“You don’t have to decide right now, bud. Take your time. Think about it. This is a family decision.”

“Auntie Em?” Reagan’s looking up at me from my lap. These are the moments when I realize how fast she’s growing. How much longer will she fit there? “I really miss him.”

I have to bite my tongue to keep the tears at bay. “I know you do.”

“He just has to say he’s sorry. If he says he’s sorry, then it’ll all be okay.”

“No, it *won’t*,” snarls Josh. “Saying you’re sorry doesn’t change anything.”

I put my hand on Josh’s leg and squeeze his ankle gently. “Sweetheart, everyone makes mistakes. Everyone says stuff they don’t mean.”

He flinches. “What if he did mean it?”

I take a breath. I’m not sure why I’m sitting here, trying to defend him. I’m hurting, too, just like them. I’m uncertain, too, just like them.

“We’ll never know unless we give him the chance to take responsibility for his actions.”

Josh sighs. “I’ll think about it.”

That night, while the kids are eating dinner, I check my phone hoping for a message. But there’s nothing. Just his standard gifts and a bunch of food. I let myself get hopeful enough to expect more. I’d expected him to show up here every day demanding to be let up, vowing to win us back come hell or high water. I’d expected him to show up at the school just so that he could see the kids. I’d expected him to call me every night whether or not I answered.

He’ll fight for himself and for his Bratva. Why won’t he fight for us?

Honestly.

Men.

EMMA

I glance back over my shoulder at the two beefy bodyguards who have been shadowing me and the kids since the day after we'd moved back into the building.

Ruslan's orders, no doubt. Part of me wants to be touched by it.

But somehow, it still comes off as impersonal. Detached. Why the hell doesn't *he* show up once in a while?

Be careful what you wish for.

I haven't made a fuss because honestly, it's not that much of a hindrance. I don't go out much unless it's to pick and drop the kids off at school. And honestly, all four guys who've been put on locked-and-loaded babysitting duty are nice.

The team splits at the beginning of the day. Two of the guards, Lazar and Shura, stay behind on school property to watch out for the kids. The remaining two, Zakhar and Gedeon, drive back with me.

The last bell rings just as Boris parks the car. I make towards the middle school entrance first, knowing that Josh will find me. I notice Reagan running down the steps a few minutes later but... no Caroline.

And no Lazar, either.

"Hey, honey, how was school?"

Reagan's never very chatty about school after the day's done. She just shrugs her shoulders. "Good."

"Where's your sister?"

"I dunno. She wasn't at lunch."

My heart starts to pound harder in my chest and a drop of cold sweat trickles down my spine.

"Aunt Em!" Josh runs up to me with Shura following behind him.

"Where's Lazar?" Shura asks. His scowl shifts as he pulls out his phone and starts typing furiously.

Zakhar and Gedeon exchange a glance. "We'll do a quick look around," Gedeon says with a reassuring nod.

But there's a sinking feeling in my gut that I can't ignore. *Keep your shit together. Josh and Reagan are watching.*

"Reagan, honey, can you remember if you saw Caroline on the playground at recess?"

"Oh, yeah," she nods. "She was on the jungle gym. But then she said she was gonna go climb trees."

"Trees?" I ask. "What trees?"

Reagan is beginning to look nervous. She bites her bottom lip and looks around. "I... I don't know... Those ones over there, I think."

She points to a line of trees behind the school. They're still technically growing within school grounds but they're far from any of the buildings. Even the playground.

"Don't worry," Shura says, moving a little closer to me. "Lazar will be with her. Stay here with the kids, okay? I'm gonna go check the grounds."

I manage to wait a few minutes before my fear starts drowning out my sense of reason. "Josh, Reagan, go inside and stay there, okay? I'll be right back."

Then I start running towards the line of trees, hoping to God that Caroline

will pop up behind one of them.

Please, please, please.

But the feeling burgeoning in my chest isn't in the least bit encouraging. Every time I've felt this kind of heaviness, it's been accompanied by very real problems.

The time Josh was taken.

Running into Remmy at that club.

Seeing my parents at that fancy restaurant.

"Caroline!" I yell at the top of my lungs. "Caro—"

And that's when I see something through the trees. Except it's nothing good. The wired chain-link fence that rings the outer perimeter of the school has been torn apart, leaving a gaping hole large enough for a grown man to walk through.

"No," I gasp, rushing forward. "No, no, no, no..."

There's no way this was an accident.

"Caroline!" I scream again.

A couple of birds rustle out of the overhead branches and I whip around. Something catches my eye. My gaze lands on the shape and I gasp. I also take a startled step back.

And that's how I end up on my ass in the leaves, staring at the lifeless body that used to belong to Lazar.

I choke on my own saliva as I fumble to retrieve my phone from the front pocket of my jeans. My vision is blurring fast behind my tears but I still manage to find his number. The call drops before it even connects.

I try again. "Come on, Kirill..."

But this time I get only an automated voice message. "*The person you are trying to contact is not in reach.*"

“Dammit!” I scream.

But despite my frustration, I have the foresight to enable my live location and send it to Kirill. I’m not entirely sure why I do it. It just makes me feel better to know that he can find me as long as I have my phone on me. Especially because I’m pretty sure I’m going to jump right through that hole and start hunting for Caroline myself.

“Aunt Emma?”

I jerk to my feet the moment I hear Josh’s voice. I turn to the side and realize that Reagan is with him, too.

“I told you two to stay inside the school!”

“But—”

“No buts! It’s not safe! Go back—”

Before I can finish my sentence, I notice Josh’s eyes go wide. He opens his mouth, but before he can say anything, something envelopes me. The world goes dark. Strong, muscular arms grip me from behind and the more I struggle, the harder I get manhandled.

I’m aware that, somewhere close, Reagan and Josh are struggling just as hard as I am. *No, I want to scream, don’t hurt them! Just take me instead.*

But I can’t find my voice. I feel weak. Tired. Strangely removed.

My last coherent thought is—

I wish Ruslan was here.

RUSLAN

“What do you mean, ‘they’re not home yet’?”

The security guard twitches every single time I look directly at him. “Ms. Carson left a few hours ago to pick the kids up from school, sir. She hasn’t been back since then.”

“What time does she usually come back home?”

“The pickup never takes longer than an hour. She’s always back at 1:30 at the latest.”

My jaw clenches. *Something’s not right.* “I’m going up.”

The guard frowns. “What about the access code, sir? You need it to enter the unit.”

I glance at the tag on his chest. “It’s *my* penthouse, Ken. I have an override code that I use for emergencies and as far as I’m concerned, this qualifies.” I glare at him. “Do you intend to stop me?”

He swallows and doesn’t say a word.

“I didn’t fucking think so.”

Sure enough, he doesn’t make any attempt to stop me as I head towards the elevator where I stamp in the override code. When the elevator doors whisk again, I find myself standing in the entrance foyer, surrounded by an eerie quiet that confirms that Emma and the kids are not home.

I wander through the space, noticing the takeout containers in the trash and the pile of gifts pushed to one corner. All the gifts that I've sent to the girls have been opened. All the gifts I've sent to Josh and Emma are still wrapped tight.

My gut twists uncomfortably.

I take a lap around the apartment, but it doesn't look like Emma's tried to skip town again. All her things are strewn about her room and the whole place still smells like her. I check the room for her music box, just to make doubly sure. I find it sitting on the dressing table in her bathroom. When I touch the button, the lid flips up and a tiny silver ballerina starts pirouetting as a mournful song rings out.

They say that a crowded room can be the loneliest place in the world.

I'm learning now that a silent room with a sad song playing is the quietest place in the world.

But it does mean she hasn't tried to run out on me. That's good.

The relief is short-lived, though. *Where is she?* I have no texts back from her. None from the team assigned to her, either. The last update I got was from Lazar telling me everything was under control. But that was at ten this morning. Clearly, that is no longer the case.

My stomach keeps on churning. I call Shura but the call goes straight to voicemail. Gedeon's line rings and rings but he doesn't pick up. Zakhar's does the same.

Something is definitely not right.

I rush out of the penthouse and phone Kirill on my way down. I'm not sure if it's the elevator or Kirill's phone but the call drops almost instantly.

More churning. It's painful now. I feel as though I'm going to burst a blood vessel. I explode back into the lobby, causing Ken to step back in alarm when I blaze past. The takeout food I brought for Emma and the kids is still sitting on his counter.

"Keep the food," I snarl at him as I leave.

I'm almost at my car when my phone starts to ring. I'm hoping it's one of the bodyguards but instead, it's Kirill.

"Sorry, man, I was in the cellar dealing with Vadim. You know there's no reception down there. He's—"

"I don't give two fucks about Vadim right now. Emma and the kids are missing."

"*What?*"

"The security detail I put on them is not picking up, either."

I hear him breathing and tapping on his phone. "Wait. Hold up... I think I got a message from Emma earlier. I didn't really look at it because I wanted to return your call first."

"What does it say?" I demand impatiently.

"Uh... ah, here it is. Fuck." He sucks in a sharp inhale. "She sent me her live location... over an hour ago. I didn't get it until just now when I left the cellar. According to this, she's still at the school." His voice dips a little and I know he's worried, too. "Or at least, her phone is."

"I'm heading over there now."

I'm driving over to Chilton like a madman when my phone starts to ring again. I transfer it to the car's speaker phone and hit accept.

"Boss."

"Zakhar, what the fuck? Why didn't you answer my calls?"

"There's been an incident, sir."

"Where are Emma and the kids?"

"I... they... um..."

"Spit it out, Zakhar."

He clears his throat. "We lost them, boss. The school has cordoned off the area."

What does he mean, they ‘lost’ them? And why does the school need to ‘cordon off’ anything? Isn’t that just for crime scenes and dead bodies?

Fuck.

“I’m almost there.”

Then I hang up and step on the accelerator. There’s a throng of people at the school gates when I approach. Most of them are wearing uniforms and protective vests.

Cops.

I breeze past the police manning the perimeter when I see my men clustered next to the school building. “What the *fuck* happened?” I growl as I storm up. “Where are Emma and the kids?”

Gedeon, Zakhar, and Shura exchange cautious glances. “It appears that they’ve been taken,” Shura admits. He gestures over to the side where I can see a gaping hole in the chainlink fence that marks the outer perimeter of the school grounds.

“Why are the cops involved?”

“Because a teacher stumbled across the body. She called them in.”

“‘Body’?” That’s when it hits me: there are three men in front of me instead of four. “Lazar?”

Gedeon nods. “He was shadowing Caroline when she decided to climb trees during recess. But someone accosted them—”

“Someone was watching them the whole time,” I growl through gritted teeth. “When do we estimate they took Caroline?”

“A few hours before they took Emma and the other two kids, but they were lying in wait for the others,” Zakhar explains. “At least that’s what we suspect. Emma showed up a couple of hours ago with Gedeon and Shura in tow. That’s when we realized that Caroline and Lazar were a no-show.”

Gedeon points to the outer boundaries of the school. “We were doing a search of the grounds. We told Emma and the kids to stay put until we came

back.”

Of course she didn't stay put. She went looking for Caroline.

“We believe she and the other two kids were taken from the same spot where Caroline was taken.”

“Oh, and boss?”

I turn to Zakhar, who hands me a phone with a regretful grimace. I stare down at the lockscreen that lights up when it changes hands. It's a photo of all three kids, smiling back at the camera.

Emma's phone.

“*Blyat*,” I spit, twisting around. “The three of you stay here and clean up this mess. Recover Lazar's body and make sure the cops stay out of our business. Say whatever you have to fucking say.”

None of them dare to say anything else. I storm back to my car and dial Kirill.

“Did you find them?” he asks as soon as he answers.

“I found Emma's phone.”

“Fucking hell... so—”

“They've been taken. I severely underestimated Adrik.”

“You think it was Adrik?”

“Who the fuck else could it be?” I demand. “I didn't think he was insane enough to try this shit, but he was released a week ago now. He's had time.”

“But he doesn't have the resources.”

“That we know of.”

“Should I go back down to the cellar and beat some answers out of Vadim?”

“First—we call an emergency meeting. Second—I'll deal with Vadim. Third—I get my family back.”

EMMA

The van has no windows in the back, which means it's near pitch black in here. But I can make out three little silhouettes and, if nothing else, that comforts me.

Caroline jumped on me the moment I'd been thrown into the van. All three kids scrambled around me as we'd grappled with the black cloth bags over our heads until we finally managed to rip them off.

"They did that to me, too," Caroline told us in a small, terrified voice.

We've been driving for what seems like a long time. Or maybe that's just the fear and adrenaline talking, stretching time into weird shapes. Reagan and Caroline's heads are both tucked into my lap while Josh sits next to me with his arms wrapped tightly around his legs.

"Auntie Em, I'm scared," Reagan squeaks softly.

Her eyes are so wide as they turn up at me that the whites of her eyes seem to shine. Her chin is trembling hard and all I can do is stroke her hair.

"I'm gonna protect you, okay?" I assure her. "I'm gonna protect all of you."

"How?" Caroline asks. "You're trapped here, too."

She has a point.

"We need to figure out a way to call Ruslan." Josh's eyes meet mine. The longer we stay in the darkness, the clearer things become. "He'll come for

us.”

Tears prick unexpectedly at my eyes. Those four little words prove that, despite all his hurt, he still has faith in Ruslan. Deep down, he knows that Ruslan cares about us, even if he doesn't always show it.

Our bodies teeter to one side as the van takes a sharp bend. I can hear muffled murmurs from the front of the van but we're separated from it by a thick black partition.

As far as I know, Ruslan has Adrik in his custody. So... who the hell are these guys? And what do they want with us?

Are we slowing down?

“Kids, listen to me carefully, okay?” All three of them perk up with alertness. The girls lift their heads from my lap. “You stay in the corner of this van and be as still as possible. The moment you get the opportunity, you *run*. Do you hear me?”

All three kids look terrified. Hell, I'm sure I do, too. But it's all we've got.

“Run where?” Reagan asks, chewing on her bottom lip. “I won't know where I'm going.”

“Find an adult and ask them if you can make a call to your dad,” I instruct them, thinking on my feet. “Then call Ruslan. All three of you know his number by heart, right?”

“I don't!” Reagan says in a panicky voice. “Auntie Em, I don't!”

Josh grabs her hand. “I know it. Repeat after me.”

He starts repeating Ruslan's number slowly, enunciating each digit. He repeats the number three times and then has Reagan say it again after him.

Oh, God, we're definitely slowing down.

By the time the van comes to a stop, Reagan has the number memorized. At least, I hope so. I nod to the kids and they push themselves into the corners of the van as the engine dies. I can't hear much from the outside, but I do hear the sound of the driver's door open and then shut. The other door does the

same.

I'm hoping that we're dealing with only two men. Somehow, I doubt we'll be that lucky.

"Auntie Em," Reagan says from her corner. Her voice is trembling violently. "I'm still scared."

My heart splits. "I know, sweetheart. But I promise you, I'm gonna keep you safe."

Josh reaches for his sister's hand. "Me, too."

Thud. Click. The door handle mechanism springs open. Reagan gasps and scurries backwards. Caroline slaps her hands over her face and Josh's fists tighten as the double doors to the van are flung open. I hold my breath, ready to face our captor, ready to attack. But—

"Ben?!"

EMMA

The shock of seeing my brother-in-law freezes me in place. So much for the fight I was planning on putting up. I'm dumbfounded.

He has the audacity to smile cheerfully at the kids. "Hey, guys. Missed me?"

He actually has the balls to say that out loud.

"You motherf—"

But before I can finish the expletive, something flies past me, knocking me off-balance. It takes a second for me to register that the little cannonball that blazed past was none other than Josh.

He hurls himself on Ben and the two of them kick up a cloud of dust as they collapse in the dirt. Reagan and Caroline scream, rushing around me in panic.

"Josh!" I cry.

But he's not listening. He's too busy beating the shit out of his father. He's unloading punch after punch in his dad's face, and despite the size difference, it's all one-way traffic. Every punch is devastating and efficient.

"What the... Stop!... Fucking hell... J-Josh... stop!" Ben splutters from between his raised arms.

But Josh doesn't stop. He doesn't look like he's anywhere close to stopping. And I'm not super inclined to stop him myself. Not until I see how terrified the girls are right now.

“Josh, honey... stop.”

I leap out of the van while the girls hover on the edge of it. The whole time, their brother keeps pummeling the shit out of Ben. Blood and sweat mingle with the dirt beneath them. The sweat is Josh’s. The blood is his father’s.

And then I notice a figure approach from my peripheral vision. I jerk backward when I look up and recognize his face.

“Adrik?!”

He grabs hold of Josh and drags him off Ben. Josh roars when he’s pulled off his father but Adrik just throws him onto the dirt and pulls out a gun.

Everyone freezes.

“That’s enough,” he says quietly.

He stands just over Ben’s face. Ben looks like shit, covered in muddy, bloody grime. Adrik looks down at him in disgust.

“Beaten by a child. Pathetic.”

“You know what’s even more pathetic?” I snarl. “Kidnapping your own kids and terrifying the shit out of them.”

I back up so that I’m shielding both girls. But Josh is entirely too exposed for my liking. I keep trying to make eye contact with him but his gaze is firmly fixed on his father.

Ben sits up and scowls at me. “You left me no choice.”

“Actually, you were *given* a choice. Many of them. You just chose wrong.”

“As much as I hate to break up all the family drama here,” Adrik drawls, “this is getting boring.”

I stare at the man in horror. “How are you even free?”

“You don’t know?” Immediately, I bite my tongue. Why the hell did I even open my mouth in the first place? “Oh, poor thing. He didn’t tell you.”

That old, familiar uncertainty gnaws at my stomach. “What do you want,

Adrik?” I stammer out, trying to keep my voice from breaking.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he growls. “I want revenge. We both do.”

My eyes snap to Ben’s. “First, Remmy, and now, Adrik? What is wrong with you? What *happened* to you, Ben. Were you always a worthless bastard or did that happen after Sienna died?”

I’m so angry that I’m not minding my words. They fly out of my mouth, oblivious to the three children who are watching and listening to everything.

Adrik scoffs. “Judging from the last five minutes alone, the first one is probably the most accurate.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Yeah, well, it takes one to know one.”

He tries to hide his scowl behind a smile. “You’re tired. Let’s get you all inside, shall we?”

“Inside” turns out to be an old house that’s clearly been left to its own devices for too long. There are rotting boards nailed over the windows and a layer of dust that clings to its façade like a second skin. Vines and ivy are reaching their fingers into the house through every nook and hole and cranny.

Adrik gestures with the gun. “Off we go. Hurry up. You first.”

“Stop pointing the gun at my kid!” I yell when the pistol lingers carelessly on Josh. “If you hurt a single hair on any of their heads—”

“Our *dad* will get you!” Reagan practically yells.

“Yeah,” Caroline adds with her teeth bared. “He’ll kill you.”

Ben looks extremely confused. Josh seems to notice the same thing because he scowls in Ben’s direction. “They’re not talking about *you*. They’re talking about Ruslan.”

Ben’s eyes go wide with disbelief. Then his mouth turns down in anger. “Ruslan is *not* your fucking father.”

“He’s ten times the man you are,” I spit. “Why wouldn’t he be ten times the father?”

Ben shoves himself to his feet and Josh quickly follows, taking up a defensive position, ready to throw himself between me and Ben if he needs to. It's all freaking wrong. *I* should be the one protecting him. Not the other way around.

“Listen, you bitch—”

“That's enough!” Adrik's voice cuts through Ben's anger. “Get them inside and shut the fuck up, Ben.”

Ben flinches and throws Adrik a surreptitious glare. I'm getting the feeling that Ben might just be scared of the man he's chosen to ally with. Maybe a part of him is already regretting the decision.

I hope so, at least.

“Do I have to repeat myself?” Adrik demands, waving his gun in the air.

Ben stumbles forward and gestures for us to follow him into the house. He doesn't make another attempt to talk to me or the kids. It would be the perfect opportunity to run. The two of them wouldn't be able to catch all four of us, right?

But the problem is that Adrik is armed.

And he looks just desperate enough to shoot.

The man is a mess, inside and out. His hair is dirty and disheveled. His clothes are ragged and bloodstained and a pungent smell clings to his skin like a disease. Worst of all, though, is the manic gleam in his eyes. That icy control he once had is gone. I suspect Ruslan has something to do with its disappearance.

Adrik makes eye contact with me. He pulls back his lips to reveal his teeth—or what remains of them after whatever the hell Ruslan did to him. There are bloody stumps of gum where his canines used to be. “Don't you go getting any ideas. I *will* raise my gun—and it won't be at you.” His gaze veers to the girls at my back.

“You are fucking scum!” I raise my arm and Josh inches towards me. “It's just a matter of time before Ruslan comes for us, and then everything he did

to you already will feel like a nice massage compared to what he'll do next.”

“Yeah?” he glowers at me. “He can certainly *try*. Now, get the fuck inside.”

And because he's got the gun and I've got three children, I do the only thing I can do.

Listen.

RUSLAN

We're down only one man and yet it already feels like a much smaller group. Mikael, Arkady, and Nikolai don't address our missing *vor*, which is how I know that Fyodor has already informed them of the betrayal.

"I opted for mercy," I start without giving them any context. "I opted for leniency. And he decided to spit in my face."

Fyodor's eyes go wide. "Who are you—?"

"I released Adrik a week ago. He repaid me by hunting down my family and taking them. Now, it's time to end this."

Nikolai clicks his tongue, a surefire sign that he approves. "This dance with Adrik has gone on long enough. It's about time."

"I agree," Mikael says with a curt nod.

Arkady inclines his head towards me. "As do I. We are with you."

Fyodor clears his throat. "Then you should know all the facts. I told you about my brother's betrayal and I told you he was working with Adrik this whole time. What I didn't tell you is why they decided to ally with one another."

Kirill takes his seat heavily. "Does it matter, Fyodor?"

"It does to me." His voice is raspy, his eyes cold. He doesn't look at me when he drops the bomb. "Adrik is Vadim's son."

Nikolai is in denial. Arkady is in shock. Mikael is the only one who nods. “I fucking *knew* it.”

“How?” Kirill asks with one raised eyebrow.

He shrugs. “I used to watch them together at parties and clubs. They seemed to get along really well, *until* someone showed up. It always felt like their friction was a setup for the benefit of others.”

“Glad you waited ‘til now to mention it,” Kirill snaps.

Mikael simply leans back in his seat. “I had no proof. And I wasn’t about to accuse a senior *vor* of keeping a secret like that.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” Fyodor growls. “The past is immaterial. What matters is the decision we have to make now.”

I turn to my father squarely and look him in the eye. “There is no decision that *we* have to make. It’s *my* decision, Otets, and I’ve decided that enough is enough.”

“Ruslan, think about this. He is your cousin.”

“And he’s known that a lot longer than I have. He still abducted my family—my woman, my kids. That will not go unanswered.”

“Then lock him up. Keep him confined to a cell for as long as you want. But killing him—” He stops mid-sentence and glances around the room. It’s as though he’s just realized that he’s not the boss anymore.

“Give us the room,” I order.

My *vors* exchange pointed glances as they follow Kirill out of my office. I walk around the table and sit down beside my father. His eyes look hollow, a man so wracked with grief that he can’t even bring himself to sit up straight.

“This is not about Adrik at all, is it?” I rumble.

Fyodor gazes out the windows. “Killing Vadim’s only son... Ruslan, there will be no coming back from that.”

“Tell me honestly, Otets: do you see Vadim coming back from any of this?”

Fyodor flinches and closes his eyes. “He is the reason the Oryolov Bratva survived in the first place.”

“It was his duty to make sure it would,” I say. “I’m not trying to belittle what he did and I’m not trying to play down his sacrifices. He took care of you, of us, after the accident. He saved the Bratva. But that doesn’t give him the right to burn it down as and when he pleases.”

Fyodor sighs mournfully. His breath sounds raggedy in his thin old man’s chest.

I put my hand on his shoulder. “I know you still care for him. And I know you feel the need to save him—”

“He is my family.”

“No,” I say, leaning in closer, “*I* am your family. Emma, Josh, Reagan, Caroline—*they* are your family. You may not be a husband or a brother anymore but you are still a father. Leonid’s death didn’t change that. And you are a grandfather now, too.”

His eyes brighten infinitesimally but the light goes out almost instantly. “He wasn’t just my brother, Ruslan,” he says softly. “He was also my only friend.”

“I gave him a chance, Otets. These events have proved that Adrik is not capable of allowing us to live in peace. He wants revenge and he won’t stop until he gets it. Which means—”

“I know.” He turns his sad eyes on me. “I know.”

I get to my feet. “Forgive me, Father. My hands are tied.”

He looks up at me. There’s a question in his eyes but he refuses to ask it. Instead, he nods and I turn and leave him to the lonely room. I hate to have to do this—but it’s the only way.

Kirill, Nikolai, Mikael, and Arkady are sitting in the main living room when I walk past. The four of them rise to their feet, waiting on my instructions.

“We need a team. We’re going after Adrik today.”

Kirill frowns. “What do you mean? We don’t know where he is.”

“We will. I just have to talk to my uncle first.”

I leave them to make the arrangements while I head towards the cell block. I dismiss the two guards standing outside Vadim’s cell, then open the door and step inside.

He’s sitting on his bed with a book in hand, his back resting against the cement wall. “Nephew, what a delightful surprise. What brings you here?”

“Your son.”

Vadim’s eyebrows rise but his eye is twitching tentatively. He’s had years of practice, keeping his fear hidden. But I see it now. His fingers never sit still. They keep moving, moving, moving.

“What have you done to him?”

“I released him.”

“What?” He shoves himself upright. “When?”

“A week ago.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Why do you think?” I spit at him. “Family is everything. It may be your motto but it’s ingrained itself in my head all these years. Family means something to me, too, Uncle. Even now.”

Vadim is sweating from the forehead despite how cold it is down here. I ignore that. I will not allow myself to feel sorry for him—not now.

“I gave him a chance. I gave him his life. I gave him his freedom. And what did he do with it?” Vadim’s jaw starts twitching now, too. “He *took* my wife. He *took* my kids!”

It crosses my mind that she’s not my wife. Not yet.

It also crosses my mind that, as soon as I have them back, I’m putting a ring on Emma’s finger, dressing her in white, then taking her to bed until the whole world hears her swear she’s mine.

I push the thoughts away and all the prickly nerves that come with them. “I extended an olive branch when I let him go—and he spat it back in my face.”

Vadim’s usually watery eyes are clear as day right now. Maybe that’s why the fear in them becomes more and more prominent. “He’s acting foolishly because he knows you have me. He’s—”

“He’s throwing a tantrum is what he’s doing,” I interrupt. “And I’m not about to tolerate that.”

I’ve never seen Vadim look so weak. The man has always exuded strength, power. Even as he got older and he started to age visibly, the iron in his veins stood strong.

The difference now is that he has something to lose.

And he knows it.

“Ruslan, I’ve never asked you for anything...”

“You picked a bad moment to start asking for favors, Uncle,” I snarl.

“He’s my son... my only child. What would you do in my place... if it was Josh?”

I grit my teeth. “You have some balls asking me that question.”

Vadim snorts angrily and continues. “How old is the boy—nine? Ten? You have no idea the kind of man he’ll become. I used to think Adrik was an introvert. I used to think of him as easily bendable, easily manipulated. But he’s got a mind of his own and I couldn’t always rein him in.”

“Did you even try?”

He nods slowly. “I’ll admit, there were things he did that... I regret.” He winces as he speaks, which makes me curious.

What is it that Adrik’s done that Vadim regretted?

No—it doesn’t matter. You don’t need to know. Not anymore. Their fates are sealed.

“But the thing is, no matter what your children do, no matter what they

become—trust me, it won't matter. You will always try to protect them. Always.”

I take a deep breath and nod. “It's obvious we both love our families. So I propose we make a trade.”

Vadim leans closer in desperation, those bushy eyebrows of his rising. I feel something twist in my gut but I ignore it. I have to.

“What trade?”

“You must know where Adrik has taken them. Even the house that Adrik was keeping Sergey in—that was your house, wasn't it? That's why we couldn't find out who owned it. You didn't want it linked back to you.” Vadim coughs and I take that as confirmation. “So I'm guessing you know exactly where Adrik is. Which means you know exactly where my family is. All you have to do is give me that information and I'll spare his life.”

Vadim's lips purse up. His jaw is clenched tight and his eyelid is still twitching. “You'll really let him live?”

“He will be banished from the country, of course,” I say. “But as long as you're alive, I promise not to kill him.”

Vadim flinches. His eyes meet mine and he holds the stare. He's trying to find the lie in my face. I don't let him see anything but what he's hoping to see.

In the end, he nods and his chin droops to his chest. “There is a place on Henderson Street, in Uniondale. A house with ivy growing through the windows. You'll see it. You'll know.”

I nod and drift back towards the door. I stop at the threshold as my heart rate races up. *Am I really going to do this?*

“Do you have any real love for my father?” I'm not sure why I ask this question now. Probably because I know it's my last chance to ask him anything.

Vadim drags his weary eyes up to mine. I wonder if he knows what's coming. “He is my older brother. Of course I love him. But love can walk

hand in hand with hate sometimes. There's a fine line." He shifts uncomfortably on the spot, his eyes darting over my face. "Ruslan," he whispers, "you promised."

I nod. "I promised not to kill Adrik as long as you were alive. And I will keep that promise."

He is still my father's brother. He is still my uncle.

Which is why I wait until he looks away before I raise the gun and shoot. It happens so fast that he doesn't see it coming. He slumps against the wall, his eyes closing instantly.

I don't need to check his pulse.

I know he's gone.

EMMA

It took some effort but the girls are finally asleep. Reagan is *honk-shoo-honk-shoo-mimimi*-ing away and Caroline's eyes are fluttering softly. They're crammed in together on the dirty old mattress despite the fact that the bed is quite big. Old, yes; rotten, yes—but big. How nice of our captors.

Josh, on the other hand...

He's sitting by the window, having tried for the first hour to break it open. Turns out those wooden boards are nailed in tight. The last fading remnants of light are slanting in through the little gaps between the planks.

I drape the girl's school sweaters over them as blankets and when I'm satisfied they're not gonna wake up, I inch over to Josh. He makes space for me on the table he's sitting on. I climb aboard and hike my legs up.

"Your boxing has gotten really good."

One corner of his mouth twitches up. "I need to practice more."

"You're already amazing. You had Ben on the ground, Josh."

That gets a brief smile out of him before it disappears and he shrugs self-consciously. "Only because I took him by surprise."

I shake my head and pat his knee. "Don't sell yourself short. You're a lot braver, smarter, and stronger than you think you are. You just need to believe it."

He nods. “Ruslan tells me the same thing.”

“Does he now?”

I can sense the conflict raging inside his little head. Can almost *feel* it, like pre-storm pressure in the air. His eyes keep darting to my face and then away again. I know he’s scared but he’s desperately trying to hide it. Mostly because he’s trying to take care of me and the girls.

“We’re going to be okay,” I whisper to him.

He arches an eyebrow in a way that’s so eerily similar to how Ruslan does that I shiver. “How?” he asks.

“I don’t know how,” I admit. “I just *know*. Your mom used to tell me to manifest what I wanted and it would come. Do you know what ‘manifest’ means?”

He shakes his head.

“It means to visualize something and wish for it as hard as you can and it’ll come sooner or later. Matter of fact, she liked to say she manifested *you*.”

I smile fondly at the memory. Thinking about Sienna these past few months hasn’t hurt me as much as it once did. The ache won’t ever fully leave, I don’t think, but it’s no longer quite as sharp around the edges.

Josh smiles. “I wish I remembered her more.”

“Oh, honey, if you only knew how much all three of you remind me of her. Your compassion and kindness—that’s all Sienna. Reagan’s feistiness, Caroline’s creativity—it all comes from your mother. She’s always with you, even when you don’t know it.”

I raise my arm and Josh leans into my shoulder. I try not to make a big deal out of it, but he never lets me hold him like this anymore. “I heard you talk to Ruslan,” he mumbles softly. “Are you really not gonna be with him because of what he said?”

I gulp. *Isn’t that a doozy of a question?*

“The first few days, I genuinely considered it,” I admit. “But I also don’t

know what happened that night to make him so...”

“Sad?”

“Right. Sad. I owe it to him to hear his side of the story first. And even then...” I glance down at Josh. “I know he loves you guys. He was just in a bad place that day. Sometimes, people say stuff they don’t mean because they’re afraid of what might happen if they were completely honest.”

Josh frowns. “That’s confusing.”

I laugh. “For you and me both, bud.” I tousle his hair and kiss the top of his head. “How about you try to get some sleep?”

“No. You sleep and I’ll stay up and keep watch.”

“Josh, sweetheart, you’re tired.”

“I’m not.”

I purse my lips. “That’s another trait you get from your mama—stubbornness.”

He snorts a laugh. “Okay, I guess you can take the first watch. But I’ll take the second.”

“Deal.”

Barely five minutes later, he’s on the bed next to his sisters, dead asleep. It gives me some relief to see them all together like that, even if I have no earthly idea how to get us out of this situation.

My phone had been wrestled away from me back on school grounds, so my live location isn’t about to help Kirill or Ruslan find us. Which means I’m gonna have to use my imagination to get us outta here.

I stand in the middle of the room and turn on the spot. *Come on, Emma, think like an action star. Manifest your way to freedom.*

Then I hear the lock turn in the door. I freeze, dreading the sight of Adrik again. But when the door opens, I’m faced with...

Ben.

Which is not a whole lot better.

“You,” I snarl softly.

To my surprise, he walks in and shuts the door. “Don’t try to rush the door or anything. Adrik’s got men posted outside it.”

I scowl at him. “You really think I’d try to escape without the kids?”

There’s a beautiful purple bruise on the left side of his face and he’s sporting a colorful split lip, too. Honestly, Josh deserves a standing ovation for that performance earlier. A few more minutes and he would’ve made mincemeat of the rest of Ben’s sneer.

Apparently, Ben is thinking along the same lines, because he glances at all three of them in the bed. “Where the fuck did he learn to fight like that?”

“Where do you think?”

He walks over to the boarded window and sits on the same table that Josh was using as a window seat. “They replaced me pretty damn fast.”

“What did you expect, Ben?” I want to say so much more but self-preservation keeps my tongue in check.

For now.

But I need to play this smart. I don’t have my phone on me. I don’t have a gun, either. Which means Ben is my only way out. I walk over to the table and lean against it, as far from him as possible.

“How do you even know Adrik?”

He flinches like the name stings him. “I don’t. Er, I mean, I didn’t. He approached me a few days ago. Said that I could get revenge on Ruslan for everything he’s done. Said that he would protect me from him.”

“How did he know about you in the first place?”

“He was working with that reporter, Remmy. Which is how he knew about our deal. And when he couldn’t find Remmy, he decided to find me instead.”

I suppress the gag reflex that any mention of Remmy inspires and stay

focused on the moment. “And how much money did he offer you?”

“None.” Ben offers me a shifty glance. “He told me I could get my kids back.”

“Bullshit. You didn’t do this for the kids. How much money did he offer you, Ben?” My voice is getting a little stronger, a little louder.

He grimaces and mumbles something unintelligible.

“I didn’t hear that.”

“Ten grand,” he croaks. “He offered me ten grand.”

I shake my head in disgust. “Good to know you can be bought so cheap. For God’s sake—these are your kids, Ben. That motherfucker was out there waving a gun in their faces and threatening their *lives*. And you delivered them straight to him. How can you be so surprised that they’ve replaced you with the only man who’s ever tried to protect them?”

“Listen, I didn’t know the bastard was gonna get so... so fucking *scary* once I agreed to everything,” Ben stammers. “I didn’t exactly know what his plan was.”

“But you agreed to it anyway?”

“I was upset!”

It takes all my self-control not to wring his freaking neck. But there’s a little voice in the back of my head that’s saying, *Use him. You can kill him later.*

“Ben, you can still make this right. You can still try to redeem yourself in your children’s eyes.”

He swivels toward me in alarm. “Are you insane? He would literally fuckin’ gut me.”

I grit my teeth. “Maybe that’s the risk you’ll have to take to make sure your kids are gonna be alright.”

“I’m not going up against that psychopath out there. He’s got a gun. And he’s got armed men everywhere.” He clears his throat miserably. “I’m just one man.”

“One man... who knows this house. Who knows where we are. Maybe you can just—”

“I’m not getting involved, Emma.”

“I’ve got news for you, Ben: you already *are* involved.” I push myself off the table and spin around to face him. “And here’s another reality check for you: if Adrik doesn’t kill you, Ruslan definitely fucking will.”

“So I’m dead either way?”

“You made your own bed.”

His eyes glaze over for a moment. I’d like to think it’s reality hitting him at last, but this is Ben we’re talking about. Who the hell knows what’s going on in that self-absorbed mind of his? I’m certainly not gonna waste my time trying to decipher him. I’ve long since stopped trying to hope he’ll change.

“Just fucking go, Ben. You don’t deserve to breathe the same air as those children.”

He doesn’t argue. Just leaves the room without a word. *Fuck you*, I want to scream, but the words are lodged in my throat, weighed down by fear.

That was our last option walking out the door.

What am I going to do now?

RUSLAN

I don't waste any time. We don't even brake the caravan as we approach.

"Faster," I bark into the radio linking me to the rest of the units fanning out across the road. "I don't want to give this *mudak* a single breath to contemplate what's about to happen to him."

The explosives team leads the way, lobbing bombs around the perimeter to take out any circulating patrols.

Shit goes *boom*. The world shakes.

No points will be awarded for subtlety today.

As soon as we're in range, the full might of the Oryolov Bratva comes pouring out of vehicles with me at the front. Kirill is at my side the entire time. Mikael, Arkady, and Nikolai fan out alongside me, each taking a contingent of men with them.

We've got the house surrounded in no time. Adrik has men, but they're nowhere near enough to stop the shitstorm I've brought with me. Every motherfucker who sticks so much as a toe out gets mowed down instantly.

For a few chaotic minutes, bullets scythe through the air, screaming as they bring death down on the heads of the bastards who took my family.

Then the deluge dies down. Only a few sporadic reports of gunfire here and there as Adrik's men retreat up the stairs. That means Adrik is up there.

And where Adrik is...

That's where I'll find my family.

I aim carefully, taking out two of the men on the staircase. Seeing their comrades die seems to send a message to the remaining fighters.

They're next.

"We'll stand down!" one screams. "We'll stand down. Just don't shoot."

To show me he means it, he drops his gun and puts his hands in the air. The three other men beside him on the staircase seem skeptical as they watch him descend the staircase.

"I surrender," he repeats.

"Good. Then I'll spare your life." I turn to the remaining three men on the staircase. "What about you three?"

There's a moment of hesitation before two of the three men drop their weapons and come down behind the first. Maybe this will be easier than I thought it would be.

I glare at the last man standing. "Are you prepared to die for your leader?"

He rises to his feet, his eyes looking over the three men who just surrendered their weapons. *Don't say it, you stupid mudak. Don't you say—*

"I'm no fuckin' coward."

He raises his gun fast. But I'm faster. I shoot him right in the face and he stumbles back, painting the wall with his blood.

"No, but you are a fucking idiot." I turn to the remaining three men. "And as for you, I appreciate your cooperation. But I learned a long time ago: never accept a surrender that's been given *after* the battle is lost."

I don't have to raise my gun this time. From behind them, Mikael, Kirill, and Arkady take aim and shoot the poor bastards in the backs of their heads. In unison, all three collapse at my feet and I glower at their bodies with disgust.

"My uncle taught me that," I add quietly.

I don't have long to admire the blood of my enemies before a terrified little girl's scream sends panic surging in my veins.

Reagan.

I bound up the staircase three steps at a time. One last cluster of Adrik's men stands at the ready outside the final room at the end of the corridor. I don't bother breaking stride—I just mow them all down with ruthless efficiency. Truth be told, they were dead long before I arrived.

They just didn't know it yet.

I leap over the pile of still-warm bodies. It takes only one strong kick to send the door they were guarding flying off its hinges. I hear a collection of gasps and screams but it's all music to my ears.

Emma. Reagan. Caroline. Josh.

They're all here, crowded behind the mattress flipped on its side.

But someone else is in here, too.

Adrik is standing in the middle of the room, his face twisted with a scowl. He makes a show of waving his gun in the air.

"Cut the shit, Adrik," I snarl. "It's over. You've got nothing left. No men, no resources. And no more Daddy to bail you out."

Adrik's eyes narrow. "You killed him."

"No, *you* killed him. By pulling this shit. Put down the gun and be sensible."

"Sensible?" he repeats furiously. "Sensible?! Being 'sensible' is what forced my father into a life of servitude."

My eyes roll with contempt. "He lived in a seven-bedroom penthouse in New York City. He ate caviar for breakfast and traveled in a private jet all around the world. If it was a life of servitude he had, most men alive would slaughter everyone they know for just one day of it."

Adrik is unconvinced. "He should have been the *pahkan*."

"What you're saying is that *you* want to be *pahkan*."

He turns his weapon to the side, pointing it at Emma and the kids. I freeze immediately. They all do. Reagan is buried under Emma's arm while Caroline is hiding behind her back. Josh is the only one who's not ducking behind the bed, despite Emma's best efforts to pull him down beside her.

Adrik shakes his head. "You always did think you were better than me."

"Prove me wrong then," I say. "Stop waving a gun at children. Fight me like a man and take what you think you deserve."

Glowing fiercely at me, Adrik slowly lowers his weapon. Someone calls my name, one of the girls, but I don't dare take my eyes off Adrik for a second.

"Emma," I say without glancing at her, "cover the girls' eyes."

I hear her whispering to them. Soft, urgent words that I can't make out. Adrik's gaze stays fixed on me. "How did you kill him?" he asks as we start to slowly circle each other.

"Bullet to the head. He didn't see it coming. I made sure of that."

"How merciful of you," Adrik snarls sarcastically. "I always told him that you'd turn on him the first chance you got."

"Then you don't know a thing about me."

"I know that you're an entitled—"

I don't allow him to finish the sentence. I lunge closer and punch him right in the face, sending him keeling back towards the window.

His rage doesn't hinder him like I expect. In fact, it makes him faster, more determined. He charges toward me, unloading a barrage of jabs and hooks, one of which catches me cleanly on the jaw.

Suddenly, I'm a boy again. I'm with Leonid in the gym. *Move your head. Anticipate. Feel the air move before the punch comes.*

That lesson ended with me eating punch after punch from him. So did the next lesson, and the next, and the one after that. But slowly, I learned how to move. Leonid didn't go easy on me, but that was a gift in and of itself. *Our*

enemies won't go easy on you, little brother. Why would I?

I catch sight of Josh over Adrik's shoulder. His eyes are huge, his jaw clenched brutally tight. I want more than anything to keep them safe. To show him what it is to be a man, the same way my brother taught me the meaning of it. I want them to know I will protect them.

But the distraction gives Adrik just enough of an opening to slam a fist into my gut. When I double over with a grunt of pain, he throws a knee into my chin hard enough to make me see stars.

I spit blood and a broken tooth on the floor as Adrik retreats a step or two so he can laugh at my agony. "I'm better than you, Ruslan Oryolov. I've always been and I've gonna prove that right fucking now."

He sends a brutal kick my way but I sidestep it and hurl a punch at his stomach. It's not a perfect blow, but it's enough to stagger him, and when he goes stumbling backward, his foot catches a loose floorboard and plants him on his ass.

"Keep talking, Makarov. You're just digging yourself a deeper hole." I tower over him, blood streaming down my chin and chest. "Let's face it: *this* is where you really belong. At my fucking feet."

Adrik sneers up at me, a kernel of fear flashing across his eyes. "You don't know what I'm capable of."

He's trying to sidle out from underneath my shadow but I raise my foot and pin it down on his chest. "You got something to say? Then *say* it."

He bares his teeth as I put more of my weight on his chest. "Your brother was alive after the car skidded into that lamppost. He was bleeding from the head but he was alive."

My body goes cold. "How... how do you know that?"

"Because *I* was driving the car that crashed into them."

My head feels like it's about to explode. My body is tingling with disbelief and rage. Adrenaline pumps through me, hot and venomous.

Adrik shoves himself upward, taking advantage of my shock. He knocks my

leg off him and comes at me hard, with a dead man's fury.

He was counting on my distraction—which he got. But in his desperation, he hadn't accounted for my rage. It explodes out of me, catching him between its fangs. I slam my forehead into his face until his eyeballs roll back in his skull. He punches and swings elbows, and more than one of those strikes catches me, until my face is a waterfall of blood.

None of it matters.

I still pin him to the wall by his throat.

“Say it again, motherfucker,” I rasp. “Say that bullshit one more time and see what happens.”

But I can tell by the look in his eyes that it's true. And maybe I knew it in my bones long before I knew it in my head. Of *course* this is how it happened. The sick threads of my life coming together in a vicious knot.

Vadim had taken care of everything after Mom and Leonid's deaths. He must've known he would've been the one to do that, too. *So he forced it to happen all by himself.* He thought he could play puppet master and make my father and me dance to his tune. He sent his son out to kill my family—to kill me, too, if only I'd been in the car the way I was supposed to—and he thought he'd come along and scoop up the pieces for himself.

“You're getting it, aren't you?” Adrik laughs manically. “I can tell. I can *smell* it on you. I killed your whore of a mother and your bastard of a brother. And you know what? I don't regret it. I watched the car burst into flames and that was the moment when I realized what I was capable of.”

“Emma,” I growl, voice breaking with rage, “get the kids out of here.”

I hear the scurrying of feet as Emma herds them out of the room. The moment the door closes, I tighten my grip around Adrik's neck.

“This will not end well for you, Adrik. I will—”

I stop short as pain erupts down my side. I glance down and realize that Adrik has stuck me with a knife he pulled out from fuck knows where. The strength evaporates from my grip immediately. He pushes me off him and

lurches for his gun, which is lying only a few feet away where he dropped it.

Everything happens in reverse this time. *I'm* the one tripping. *I'm* the one falling on my back. *He* is the one putting his foot on my chest and standing over me, ready to rain down death.

No! I want to bellow. *This can't be how it—*

BANG!

The gunshot rings out. I wait for the pain, but it doesn't come.

Then Adrik crumples to the floor.

I twist around and find a shaking Josh, holding a smoking gun. *My* smoking gun.

I reach up and snatch it from his hands. The stab wound screams with pain as it leaks too much blood, but if I hesitate now, I'm risking my life and more importantly, Josh's. So I harness all my willpower and all my strength to turn a blind eye to the pain.

I stand and kick Adrik's gun away from where he's still reaching for it. Josh got him in the shoulder and he's bleeding like a stuck pig, same as me. But when he sees he has no chance left, he stops and looks up at me.

"Put your gun down and fight me like a man," he croaks.

It's a pathetic attempt to goad me. "We just tried that. As it turns out, you're *not* a man. You're a fucking ghost." I cock my gun and take aim.

His eyes veer to Josh. "You're really gonna kill me in front of the kid?"

"Josh, look away."

"No," Josh replies firmly. "I'm not afraid."

I nod. I want to give Adrik the death he deserves—long, messy, painful. But I'm not about to traumatize Josh that way. So even though he doesn't deserve it, I give Adrik the same death I gave Vadim. Quick and clean.

But I make sure he sees it coming. I want him to *know* that death has come for him.

“Goodbye, cousin.”

He opens his mouth to say something, but I don't give him the chance.

I shoot once.

That's all it takes.

He flops back against the floor as blood pools around his head in two long streams like devil's horns. I drop the gun and grab hold of Josh, who returns the hug with a force I'm not expecting. Somehow, now that he's in my arms, the stab wound doesn't hurt quite as bad.

“Are you okay?” I rasp.

He nods against my chest. “I am now.”

RUSLAN

I get myself bandaged up as tight as I can before I approach the girls.

Emma is sitting on the grass outside the house, holding both of them tightly. They're clinging to her as if their lives depend on it. I take a painful knee in front of them, Josh joining me at my side.

My eyes meet Emma's and something passes between us. An electricity that's charged with heat, but also, something else.

Gratitude? Understanding? Hope?

I couldn't say.

"Reagan? Caroline?"

They turn to me, their little eyes wide for a moment. Just long enough for me to wonder if things are too broken to ever be repaired.

And then both girls jump on me at the same time.

"You saved us!" Reagan cries.

Reagan's knee is currently digging into my freshly bandaged stab wound but I don't care. Because this is the best feeling in the world.

Caroline pulls away from me. "Did you kill that bad man?"

I shouldn't be surprised by the question. I'd basically promised as much back in that room. I glance at Emma, wondering how I should answer this.

“Ruslan said he would always protect us,” Emma says gently. “And he did. Now, you’re safe—so let’s focus on that, shall we?”

I loop an arm around the two little girls and hold them as tight as I can manage. “I owe you an apology. All of you. Last week, I said some things that I shouldn’t have said. Some things I didn’t mean. I was having a bad night and I was behaving badly. Selfishly. And I can promise you this—” I can’t stop myself from looking at Josh when I say this next part. “—it will *never* happen again.” I squeeze the girls’ hands, remembering something Emma told me a while ago. “Meeting you three has been the great privilege of my life. And if you’ll let me, I want to be your father. I would be so honored to have you as my children.”

When I glance up, I see tears in Emma’s eyes. She’s trying hard to keep it together but her chin is working overtime.

“What do you say? Do you forgive me?”

Reagan gives me a toothy smile. “I forgive you.”

Caroline nods. “Me, too.”

I put a hand to my chest. “I’m eternally grateful.” Then I turn to Josh. “You don’t have to forgive me right away. I understand if—”

“I forgive you, too,” he says abruptly as a blush suddenly scales up his cheeks before he adds, “... Dad.”

If there was any pain left from the stab, it’s gone now.

That one word is the best medicine I could’ve asked for.

Then it’s a pile of limbs as all of them—Emma, Josh, Caroline, Reagan—swarm me. I’m sweaty and bloody and woozy and exhausted, but I don’t give a fuck. I’d spend the rest of my life right here in this moment if I could.

I kiss the top of each of their heads before they pull back.

“I want all of you to know how proud of you I am. You two—” I touch my finger to the girl’s noses. “—for being so brave during this whole ordeal. And you—” I turn to Josh. “—for protecting the family.”

Struggling to my feet, I glance around to check how the cleanup is going. It's a swarm of activity as my men haul away Adrik's dead soldiers and prepare the house to be burned to the ground. When I meet his eyes, Kirill gives me a thumbs up so I know it's safe for the kids to move around without coming across a body.

"Uncle Kiki!" Caroline cries as she runs to him. He grabs her mid-jump and twirls her around.

"Me next. Me next!" Then Reagan mimics her sister.

Laughing, Josh walks over to them but I'm pretty sure he's just trying to give Emma and I some alone time. He's not even nine and the kid's already fast becoming my right-hand man.

Gotta tell Kirill to watch out. The kid might just replace him soon.

I offer Emma my hand and pull her up to her feet. Then we walk around to one of the trucks for some privacy. Before I can say anything, Emma breaks the silence.

"Just for the record: I forgive you, too."

I arch a brow. "Just like that?"

Now, she's the one raising her eyebrows. "You saved me and the kids from two raging psychopaths and got stabbed in the process. I think you've proven that you care about us."

I frown. "What do you mean by *two* raging psychopaths?"

"Wait. Where's Ben?"

"Ben?" I exclaim. "As in *Ben*, Ben?"

She nods and whirls around in terror like he might be behind her. "He was—I don't know. He said Adrik came to him and... Shit, I don't know. I don't know."

"Fuck," I snarl. But there's no sign of him and my men have combed the area thoroughly by now. He must've run for the hills.

It's the only smart thing he's ever done.

She puts her hand on my chest. “Ruslan. Don’t.”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“If you’re thinking of sending a team after him like you did with Remmy, don’t.”

“How did you know?”

“I’ve known you a long time. I *know* you, Ruslan Oryolov. But trust me on this: we’re never gonna see Ben again. This time, I’m sure of it. So let’s just leave him to his pathetic life and we’ll get on with ours.”

Ours. I like the sound of that.

“Okay.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I concede. “There’s been enough blood spilled already. And I don’t want to be responsible for killing those kids’ father. Even if he is a piece of shit. But just so we’re clear, if he ever comes back—

She holds up her hands. “The gloves are off. I won’t stand in your way.”

I nod with satisfaction. “Alright then.”

She gives me a shy smile from underneath her eyelashes. “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“What happened that night?”

I hesitate, not sure where to begin. And then it comes out of me in a steady stream. The words just roll out, one after another. Vadim’s betrayal. Adrik’s parentage. All the secrets. All the lies. It’s not until I’ve word-vomited all over her that I realize I’ve been *waiting* to tell her all this.

I want to *share* it with her.

What a strange thing that is.

“So... that’s everything.”

Emma looks stumped for words. She just stares back at me with her lips slightly parted. Highly distracting.

“Ruslan... God, I’m so sorry. Your father must be devastated.”

“He was—and he will be when he finds out the rest of it. But this was the only way. I couldn’t trust Adrik or Vadim with freedom. I won’t risk your lives again.”

Emma shakes her head. “It’s a lot. I’m sorry I didn’t give you the chance to explain sooner.”

“I didn’t deserve the chance to explain myself, Emma. What I said was terrible. You had every right to leave, every right to want to protect the kids from me. But I meant what I said to them: I want to be their father. I love those kids. And—I love you.”

“Wow,” she breathes softly. “You’ve never said that before.”

“I was scared to say it. But... I’m not anymore.” I take both her hands in mine. “I want you to worry about me, Emma. I want you to wait up for me and ask me what the fuck I’m doing. I want you to be there for me when I’m old and gray. I want you in every conceivable way and I will forever.”

Her eyes grow even wider. Those blue irises are mesmerizing. “Forever is a long time, Ruslan.”

I shake my head. “Not nearly long enough for me. But it’ll have to do.”

She smiles. Tentatively at first and then more and more freely. Like she’s really starting to believe me now.

“Does that sound good to you?”

She laughs and throws her arms around me. “It sounds like paradise.”

EPILOGUE: EMMA

FIVE MONTHS LATER

Ruslan Oryolov.

The big, bad Bratva *pahkan* of New York City. Hotshot CEO, shark of a businessman, and all-around tough guy.

I've never seen him sweat so much.

To be fair, he's not the only one dripping in sweat. I'm soaking right through my hospital gown. The contractions are close together now but the nurses don't seem in any hurry to prep me for the delivery theater.

Which is *bullshit*. This baby needs to come out. Like last week.

"Ice cube?" he asks me, holding out a bucket of them.

"I don't need a fucking ice cube, Ruslan. I need this baby to get out of my body!"

"Soon, baby," he assures me. "Soon."

I wince as another contraction starts up. Ruslan grabs my hand and I squeeze hard as the pain rips through my body.

"Oww...!"

He kisses the side of my forehead and when he pulls away, there's a glistening sheen of my sweat on his lips.

Oh, gee, how sexy.

“Don’t kiss me,” I snap. “I’m disgusting right now.”

“Are you insane? You’re glorious. Look at everything your body is doing. We’re at the finish line,” he assures me. “Just a couple more minutes—”

“You said that half an hour ago!”

The door swings open and I wait hopefully for the doctor to appear, but it’s only Phoebe. “Is everything good in here?”

I grit my teeth together to keep myself from screaming. “Word of advice: don’t get pregnant. If you want a baby, adopt one. Use a surrogate. Just don’t. Get. Pregnant!”

Phoebe retreats slowly to the farthest corner. “So is that a yes, or...?”

Ruslan holds my hand tight and strokes it. “We’re powering through—”

“We?” I snap. “We? I think your contribution to my predicament was months ago and it involved an orgasm. So I’m not sure what *you* are doing, but *I*’m definitely power—*ahh!*—ing through.”

Ruslan gives me a sheepish smile. “Of course. This is all you, baby.”

“Honestly, stop agreeing with me all the time. It’s infuriating.”

Ruslan just nods. “Whatever you say, *kiska*.”

I scowl at him. “Ice cubes!”

He hands them over without hesitation and turns his attention back to Phoebe. “How are the kids doing?”

“They’re good. Very excited. Amelia just took them down to the cafeteria to get something to eat. I’m gonna head down there myself. You guys want anything?”

“Oh *sure*. I’ll take a Big Mac and a side of fries,” I deadpan between clenched teeth. “Can you make that happen? Because these ice cubes just aren’t cuttin’ it, y’know?!”

Phoebe looks at Ruslan. “You’ll let us know when Emma’s back to normal?”

I hurl an ice cube at her but she hides behind the door and gives me a triumphant smile.

“Don’t worry. It shouldn’t be long now. Go, be with the kids,” Ruslan tells her with a *save-yourself* expression that I don’t appreciate one bit.

I jerk upright as another contraction starts tearing down my spine. Ruslan wedges himself in behind me and massages my back and hips while I try to breathe through the pain. His hands are gentle yet strong and it eases the pain considerably. Honestly, he’s been so damn great throughout this entire process that I start to feel a little prickle of guilt. I’m sure it’ll disappear when the next contraction hits.

“Thank you.”

“Anytime, my love.”

“I know I’m being a bitch. I’ll apologize properly after this kid’s out of me.”

Ruslan chuckles. “You have nothing to apologize for. You’re a fucking warrior.”

“Really? Because I feel like a wuss. How did Sienna do this three freaking times?”

I’ve been thinking about Sienna a lot lately. She was the first person I thought of this morning when my water burst right in the middle of school drop-off.

Yeah, that had been a lot of fun. The little kids thought I’d peed myself.

“Sienna probably had the same thoughts and feelings you’re having right now,” Ruslan offers. “But then you push out a perfect baby and you forget.”

“I won’t.”

“Yes, you will. And I’ll remind you of that when we’re back here in a couple of years having our next one.”

“I’m sorry—*next* one?” I screech. “I sure as *fuck* am not doing this a second time. We have four kids now. That’s plenty. Or we will, anyway, if this baby *ever* comes out.” I stare at my belly. “*Please* come out. Mama’s tired.”

“And terrifying.”

“What was that?” I snap.

“I said you look so beautiful right now.”

He chuckles and I can’t help but smile along with him. The door opens a second later and *hallelujah*, it’s Dr. Rollins with two nurses at his back.

“How’re you doing, Mrs. Oryolov?”

I don’t bother correcting him. I’m in too much pain to go through the whole *we’re-together-and-in-love-but-we’re-not-currently-married-or-engaged* spiel.

“Doc, I need to have this baby,” I tell him desperately. “You gotta do something.”

Dr. Rollins parts my legs gently and checks to see how far I’m dilated. “Hmm...”

“Seriously. Induce me if you have to. Or just cut me open and pull the kid out because I can’t take—”

“Looks like we’re ready to roll.”

I stop short. “W-what?”

He smiles at me. “In a few short minutes, you’re gonna meet your baby,” he announces, getting to his feet. “Let’s get her prepped for delivery.”

I turn to Ruslan slowly. “I-it’s time...”

He grabs my hand. “I know you’re scared—but don’t be. You can do this. And I’ll be with you every step of the way.”



They say it takes a few months to forget the pain of childbirth.

For me, it takes about as long as washing my newborn son up and putting him on my chest. I stare down at his crinkly pink face and marvel at the fact that, only a few moments ago, he was *inside* me.

Tiny as he is, I still can't believe he fit.

I glance up at Ruslan and find his hand somehow. "You're a dad," I whisper.

He smiles. "I already was a dad. But it's a new experience, seeing a newborn like this."

"Do you wanna hold him?"

I've never seen Ruslan cry before, but I think the closest I'll ever get is this moment right here. His eyes are shining as he lifts our son up and clutches him close to his chest.

Now, *I'm* the one who's crying.

Seeing Ruslan carrying our baby boy... it just feels so damn surreal.

Who needs a ring? You don't need to create a baby yourself to be a parent. And you don't need to be married to be true life partners.

"You did amazing, my love."

I wipe away my tears. "So did you."

He shakes his head but he doesn't take his eyes off our baby boy. "I didn't do anything."

"Not true. You supported me. You held my hand. You took my abuse." I can see the little smile forming at the corners of his mouth. "I was horrible, wasn't I?"

"I've heard worse."

I laugh. "Still. I'm sorry for being such a bitch."

Ruslan doesn't address me at all. He looks down at our son and talks to him. "Don't listen to your mama. She's one of the most amazing, most devoted, most compassionate, kindest people out there. You're lucky she's yours."

"Oh, God, you're gonna make me cry all over again."

He chuckles. "Don't. You're already dehydrated enough."

"I'll drink water later. First, I want the kids to meet their new sibling."

“Should we decide on his name first?” Ruslan asks.

We’ve been throwing around names for months now. And when you have three older kids, that means that there are a lot of opinions.

Reagan and Caroline had only come up with girls’ names but Josh supplied us with some real contenders.

There were a few good ones. *Pasha. Aleksandr. Damien.* But in the end, I knew the name I wanted our son to carry. “Now that I’ve seen him and held him, I’m thinking... Leo. Leo Oryolov. After his uncle.”

Saying it out loud seals the deal for me. Ruslan is smiling. “Leo Oryolov,” he says, trying it on for size. “It suits him perfectly.”

He glances up at the ceiling like Leonid might be watching us. Then, with a sigh, he gently deposits little Leo back into my arms and goes to get the kids. He escorts the three of them in first while Amelia and Phoebe wait outside so that we can have a little family moment.

The girls rush the bed, ignoring orders from both Ruslan and Josh to be careful. Both of them clamber onto the bed with me and lean in to look at their new little brother.

“Whoa,” Reagan breathes. “He’s so *small*. And pink.”

“How come he doesn’t have any hair?” Caroline demands.

I laugh. “He has a little hair but it’ll take time to grow.” Then I gesture for Josh to come closer. “What do you think?” I ask him. “You gonna be able to show him the ropes when he’s older?”

Josh nods solemnly. “Of course. I’m his big brother. I’ll always look out for him.”

Ruslan and I lock eyes over the kids’ heads. All that drama and hardship and fighting and fear—it was all worth it. *This* moment made it all worth it. Our kids are safe, they are happy—they’re in therapy, true; but don’t most kids need therapy these days?

We will never be perfect parents—mostly because there’s no such thing—but we will always try to be the best versions of ourselves for our kids. And we

will never stop showing up for them.

“His name is Leo.”

Caroline looks at Leo with a maternal smile. “He’s so sweet, Auntie Em.”

“He is, isn’t he?”

Reagan looks a little less thrilled by the new addition to our family. Her lips are pursed up and she’s looking at Leo with narrowed eyes.

“Rae, sweetheart, something the matter?”

She looks from Leo to Ruslan. “This baby is *your* baby. Yours and Aunt Emma’s.”

Ruslan gives me a fleeting glance. “That’s right.”

“Does that mean you love him more than me and Caro and Joshie?”

I suppress a laugh. *She’s gonna be a ballbuster when she’s older, I have no doubt.*

Ruslan just smiles calmly. “I can tell you right now: I love *all* my children equally. All four of them. And to prove it—” He walks over to the cabinet in the corner of the room where he’s stored his overnight bag. “—I have this to give to you guys.”

I frown. *What is he giving them?*

It turns out to be a stack of papers. He hands them to Josh. Josh’s eyes go huge when he reads the front page. He looks up at Ruslan as if in slow motion. “Y-you’re serious?”

“What?” Caroline demands, pulling on Josh’s sleeve while Reagan pulls on the other one. “What does it say?”

“These are... adoption papers,” Josh whispers in an awed voice.

I draw in a breath. It’s not a complete shock to me. Ruslan and I have discussed adopting all three kids. For us, it didn’t really matter. Josh, Reagan, and Caroline were ours no matter what. But this... this feels right.

“Adoption?” Caroline repeats.

“What’s that?” Reagan asks, entirely unimpressed.

“It means that legally, I will be your father,” Ruslan explains. “Which also means you get to take my last name—if you want it.” When there’s silence, he adds, “The choice is yours, of course, but—”

“Of *course* we want to!” Josh says, speaking for all three of them. “We want you to adopt us!”

“Yeah, yeah! We do.” Reagan jumps head-first on the bandwagon, even though she didn’t know what adoption was up until a few seconds ago.

“So we’ll *all* be Oryolovs then?” Caroline asks. She’s only just learned how to pronounce the name correctly.

Technically, I won’t be, but I’m not gonna be a party pooper and point that out. This is their moment. No point in ruining it, right?

Ruslan smiles cryptically. “Actually... it would be unfair of us to leave Aunt Emma out of the equation, wouldn’t it?” He reaches into his pants pocket and just like that, I feel as though all the breath has rushed out of my body.

What’s happening?

He pulls out a little black box and cracks the lid. Inside sits the most beautiful pear-shaped diamond I have ever seen.

“Ruslan!” I gasp, looking up at him. “Are you serious?”

He nods. “I want you to be my wife, Emma Carson. I want you to carry my name. I want to raise our children together forever. Will you marry me?”

I’d never imagined a proposal like this—literally surrounded by our kids. But I guess some things are just too damn amazing to imagine in the first place.

A happy tear slides down my cheek as I nod. “Of course I’ll marry you.”

Ruslan slips the ring onto my finger as Josh and the girls clap and shout and hug us clumsily. The baby boy in my arms gurgles impatiently, probably annoyed at all the commotion we’re making.

“You are so lucky, little Leo,” I whisper to him while the kids are hanging off Ruslan and screeching with joy. “To have such wonderful siblings. To have such a great father.”

As it turns out, you don't have to be married to be true life partners.

But it certainly doesn't hurt.

EXTENDED EPILOGUE: RUSLAN

TEN YEARS LATER

Check out the Extended Epilogue to take a sneak peek ten years into the future! Witness Ruslan prepare to hand over the reins of the Bratva and see how strong his love for Emma is more than a decade since the voicemail that changed everything!

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