

A RUSSIAN MAFIA ROMANCE



Marble

SINS

YAKOV BRATVA BOOK TWO

LISA LOVELL

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Yakov Bratva - Book Two

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At first, he was my worst nightmare.

Until he threw his life away... to save mine.

But Timur Yakov became so much more than just my love and
savior.

Because he left me with a gift.

A gift that will grow inside me, for the next nine months.

Too bad I won't make it that long.

Because his enemies have found me.

And they will take my life and the one growing inside me.

And as bad men loom and my belly is growing, I must make a
choice.

Die from pain and grief in a pit of despair.

Or sacrifice myself to save my baby.

And just when my final hour comes, and I'm cornered with no
way out.

A chilly breeze strokes my face and whispers something in my

ear:

“I’m coming for you dushenka.”

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Chapter One

Kayla

It's like a bad dream.

My hands are cuffed behind my back, and I'm being frogmarched down a long hallway by a pair of men in dark suits. I'm dimly aware of plush carpeting beneath my dragging feet. There are gilt-edged paintings along the walls.

I regained consciousness minutes ago in a sumptuous room. Half-naked and filthy, I bear the bruises of the fight I put up when they dragged me into the car. My first instinct had been to start screaming until the door swung open and Giselle walked in. If there'd been a relief to see her, it evaporated when the man with her pinned my hands while she poured some noxious fluid down my throat. Minutes later, I was looking at the world through a haze as a slow warmth built within me. A warmth that touched parts of my body I didn't want to think about.

My world has been shattered.

Timur!

My heart lurches. I give a whimper at the memory of him going down in the gunfight, right before my eyes. At the sound, one of the men beside me tightens his grip and tugs me more firmly. It's not the first time in the past weeks that I've been drugged and then hauled around by goons. But these men terrify me. One look at them, and I know that fighting for freedom would be a very bad idea.

Giselle is walking ahead of us with brisk, precise strides. We reach a large, ornate double door at the end of the hall, and she pushes it open.

The room beyond takes opulence to heights that are almost ridiculous. There are gold-framed pictures of historical battle scenes on every wall, including one over a huge marble fireplace depicting a general on a rearing horse. The thick carpet is cream and gold and matches thick velvet drapes that shut out the light. There's more velvet on the furnishings, with huge, overstuffed couches and chairs arranged around the room. It's like I've been delivered into some kind of crazy military bordello.

"Mr. Koslov? She is here," one of the men says.

There's a red velvet sofa facing the fireplace. I catch a glimpse of a man sitting there, his attention on something in

front of him. The bent head gives me a sense of thick golden hair and broad shoulders. He clears his throat, places one foot in front of the other, and slowly rises from the sofa. But it's only when he's fully stood up that I get a clear view of the beast who has murdered my lover and dragged me here.

Holy shit!

The man who stalks toward me has got to be the most beautiful human I've ever set eyes upon – male or female. By no exaggeration, he looks like someone made in a lab. He's golden. Thick waves of tawny hair are swept back from a broad forehead and almost impossibly symmetrical features. His eyes are insanely blue, and as they meet mine, I feel that swirl of warmth in me grow hotter.

I know it's not me feeling this way – it's whatever Giselle forced me to drink. It's unsettling. I want to look away.

He's wearing loose black pants that hook over lean hips, and a matching black satin shirt is open to reveal more golden flesh. His bare chest is smooth and beautiful – silken skin over hard, sculpted muscle.

And yet, he is the devil himself.

Nothing but a cold-blooded murderer with no moral compass.

“Hello, Kayla,” he says as he stops in front of me. “I am so glad you could finally join us. I have been waiting for such a long time to meet you. In the flesh.”

He runs those sapphire eyes over me, and I cringe. For all his beauty, there’s no mistaking the intent in him. He’s the worst human being I’ve ever encountered. It’s in the curve of his lips and the amusement in his eyes as he takes in my appearance.

“I am Kasyanenko Vasiliy Koslov,” he says, with a strange formality. “You will call me Vasya.” He smiles and reaches a hand to my chin. He tilts my head from side to side as if examining my features. I bare my teeth and hiss at him like a cat. He chuckles but doesn’t seem affected.

“You are quite a lovely thing,” he says. His voice is crisp and slightly accented. “I had a feeling poor Timur would succumb to your charms, eventually.” He chuckles again, and I feel rage surging within me. I make a low, agonized sound and spit straight at his face.

Before I know what has happened, his hand has swung up and connects sharply with my cheek. My head spins, and I

taste blood. His expression has barely changed. But there's a narrowing of his eyes that warns of a darker danger.

“Don't do that again, Kayla,” he says softly. My spittle still gleams on his high golden cheekbone. He raises his arm again. I flinch, but he's just using his sleeve to wipe his face.

“What do you want from me?” I finally raise the courage to speak. It's a stupid question. He responds with warm laughter that seems at odds with the situation.

“Oh, Kayla! What do *you* think I want from you?” His eyes remain on mine as he traces a finger down my chest to the top of my shirt and down between my breasts. Even with the fabric covering me, I feel his touch there and shiver.

I look around at his world of wealth and abundance. At his physical beauty. And it makes no sense. “You could have anyone. Why me?”

“Because I want you. And I get what I want. The fact that I got to snatch you from that arrogant idiot only makes it all sweeter.”

I know who he's talking about, but I don't want to hear it.

“You're insane,” I whisper.

“Insane?” he says. “For taking Yakov out of the picture? There are others who would disagree.”

A sob bubbles up at the mention of Timur. Of all that we have had. Of all that we could have had. Become.

“I don’t...I don’t want you,” I force the words out past the band that seems to have tightened around my throat and taken my voice. “I don’t want to be here. I want to go home.”

He laughs again. I’m beginning to hate the sound. “What home, Kayla? When I first saw you, you were a cheap stripper touting your tits for dollar bills. Now look at you. You would fit into any high-society gathering. You should be thanking me. And you probably will, once I show you the pleasure I am capable of giving you.”

“Pleasure? You’re an animal. A murdering rapist who steals girls and kills good people!” I risk the insult. Between the pain of loss and the callous cruelty of this man before me, I’m almost ready to face the worst.

He laughs out loud at this. “Kayla, I have never fucked a woman who did not beg me for it. And if you are referring to your dead hero, I have news for you. Timur Yakov was no better than I. And if you think, by some miracle, he has survived and is coming back for you, you can put that right out

of your mind. This here..." he sweeps an arm to indicate the room around him, "This is all that is left for you."

"I don't want it," I whimper. "I don't want you!"

He leans forward with a smile that would be charming if I didn't know that evil lurked behind it. "Ah, *kukolka*, I am going to have so much fun proving you wrong."

Chapter Two

Vasiliy

“Kayla, I am a reasonable man. I do not want you to think that you do not have options. If this life is not to your liking, you may choose to be sent out with the other girls. My auctions are well-attended. You will soon find an alternate situation.”

There is horror on her face. I don't wait for her to respond. It seems she doesn't have words which suits me just fine.

“That would be such a pity, girl,” I continue, glancing down at where her lush flesh spills from her ruined shirt. I cup my hand around her breast and feel her nipple hardening against my palm. There is alarm in her eyes as she realizes how her traitorous body is responding. The potion is clearly doing its magic. “We could have so much fun together.” I watch her battle with herself. It will be entertaining to see her resistance crumble.

She is better than I remembered. She'd been lush and undulating when I'd seen her dancing at that filthy little club. I had suspected I would find her even more appealing once she'd been stripped of the cheap tricks of the trade. Just because I run a sex ring doesn't mean I like my women to look like cheap whores. Looking at her now, I see that I was right. I'm going to enjoy breaking her to my ways.

But now, I have other matters to attend to.

“Enough small talk. There will be plenty of time for that once you are ready for me. In the meantime, you will be bathed. I cannot touch a woman who still bears the stench of another man.” Giselle, who has remained silent during the conversation, nods curtly.

I snap my fingers and turn away as the girl is dragged out. I resume my seat on the sofa facing the fireplace. Stretching a hand along the back of the sofa, I tip my head back, musing over the ways I will entertain myself with her during these next few days. It's always interesting when they tell me they'll resist me.

They never do.

Yegor, my second in command, has watched the proceedings without a word. Tall, tattooed, his silver hair

cropped close. Even when he is silent, his presence is impossible to ignore.

“The men are waiting, boss,” he says.

“Send them in,” I say, reaching for a cigar I’ve left smoldering in an ashtray on a side table. It’s a habit I picked up from my father. He had learned it when mimicking his own father. The fragrant smoke wafts about me as two of my men shuffle into the room. I feel an urge to sigh as I recognize them from before.

“Boris. Sergei,” I say, taking another puff and blowing it in their direction. “It seems you were successful. Well done.”

The pair exchange glances. Boris remains silent as Sergei steps forward. “*Spasibo, Pakhan*. It went down as expected. The safe house was exactly where his man told us it would be. We followed them into town in the early hours of the morning. There were no witnesses.”

“Good work, Sergei. You have his hand?” I ask. They blink at me like owls.

“His hand, Mr. Koslov?” says Sergei.

“A hand, a head, some proof that he is dead.” He stares at me and his face suddenly goes pale. I lean forward and

narrow my eyes at him. “You did not examine the corpse, Sergei?” I raise an eyebrow. He swallows hard enough for me to see his throat move. “How can you be sure that you killed him?”

“I... Boss, I...” He shifts uncomfortably. “He was shot in the chest at least three times, Mr. Koslov.”

“And you think that is definitive proof, Sergei?” I ask. He says nothing. “Come here,” I say quietly. He hovers, and I can see his body fighting his brain’s instruction to move forward. “Come here,” I repeat.

“Yes, Mr. Koslov,” he mumbles. I hear his shoes drag on the plush pile of my carpet as he carefully steps toward me.

“Give me your hand,” I say. After a moment’s hesitation, he extends it, and I take his wrist. “Do you think it is possible that he survived those bullets?” I ask. He shakes his head, staring down at where I have his hand in my grip. I take a deep draw on my cigar, then put the lit end into his palm, twisting it against his flesh as I extinguish it. He jerks against my grip as skin sings and the stench of burning flesh fills the air. He does not pull away.

“You will bring me his head,” I say softly when I look up at him. He nods quickly. “If you do not do this, you will

bring me Boris's head." I look over at Boris, who has turned a pale shade of gray. I release Sergei's wrist and sink back into my seat. "Now get the fuck out of here."

They leave so silently that I don't hear them.

Chapter Three

Kayla

I'm groggy.

I'm always groggy, but today I'm more aware of it because they've let me get up. The sense of freedom is overwhelming. Not that it's much – instead of being tied to the damn bed, I've been permitted to get up and walk around the suite. Maybe they're worried my muscles will waste away if they don't let me move at all.

Fucking animals.

I'm staring out the window, taking in my surroundings. The gardens stretch out below me as I look out from my three-story vantage point. The lawns are lush and expansive, extending as far as the eye can see. A vibrant green carpet of grass blankets the landscape and is punctuated by beds of carefully tended flowers. A few trees are scattered throughout, their branches swaying in the gentle breeze.

You'd never say this was the home of a psychopath.

“Beautiful, is it not?”

I jump at the sound of the voice behind me. “Holy crap, you scared the shit out of me!” I blurt and tense immediately. Vasiliy is so close I can feel his breath on my bare shoulder. How the hell did I not hear him coming up behind me?

Thank God they gave me a night dress to wear. Although it really doesn’t feel like enough right now.

Vasiliy takes a step back and I turn to face him. His features are stoic, but his eyes give me a hint of something else – curiosity. “So, how have you been finding it here?”

I laugh, despite the absurdity situation. I can’t believe he has the nerve to ask me if I am settling in. “I think my current state speaks for itself,” I retort. He smiles slightly. He really is a pig – a beautiful one, but a pig nonetheless.

“All this will be over soon, Kayla. Once you start to see reason.”

His words make me shudder and I look away from him again.

“Reason?” I scoff. “You expect me to be some kind of sex slave for you. How can I see reason in that?”

“Sex slave?” He smirks. “So dramatic, *kukolka*.”

“Stop calling me that!” I snap.

“Why?” Vasiliy cocks his head. “Did your poor Timur have a different pet name for you?” He chuckles. “Would you prefer it if I used that instead so you could pretend he’s not dead?”

My heart stutters and I swallow hard. Tears prick at the corners of my eyes and I fight to keep them at bay.

No crying!

Don't you fucking cry!

I refuse to let this monster see me weaken.

“That’s none of your business, you sick bastard!” I hiss the words out lacing as much venom into them as I can.

“Everything about you is my business, Kayla,” he says mildly, reaching a hand out to trace a stray curl from my face. “I own you.”

I jerk my head away. “Let’s get one thing straight, Vasya.” My lip curls. “You may have me locked up here against my will, but you will never...*ever*...own me. Do you understand? You may have my body, but you’ll never have my heart.”

He chuckles again, the sound maddeningly amused. “If I wanted your heart, I would have it cut out and served to me on a platter.” He’s still toying with the tendril of my hair. “But that might be what you want – a chance to join your dead lover?”

My breath hisses out and I feel a cold wave wash over me. I know it’s not an idle threat, yet I refuse to let him see that I’m afraid. Instead, I glare at him, trying to picture myself reaching up and strangling him. Trying to will myself to be brave. It works...almost. “You’re despicable,” I say between gritted teeth. “I would never wish for death. My only hope is to live and find a way out of this hellhole you have put me in. And then, I’ll make it my mission to make you sorry you ever did this.”

He smiles thinly and takes a step closer until our bodies are almost touching. The air between us crackles with tension as he looks down at me, his eyes blazing with a fire I cannot name. “Yes...I think that you would try. But I have always loved a challenge, *kukolka*.”

He reaches up and cups my face in his hands before leaning in to brush his lips over mine. I stiffen, wanting to pull

away but something inside me stops me from doing so – fear and the urge to gag war within me – and yet I can't move.

“I hate you so fucking much.” My voice is husky, a mere breath against his lips.

He takes a step back again and his gaze is now hard and cold as ice – no longer the turbulent fire it was only moments ago. “Just for the record, Kayla, I'm not interested in how you feel about me,” he says. “I will possess you whether you like it or not.”

It's my turn to step away now. “That's all you'll ever do. Possess. Take. I hope that will satisfy you. Knowing you'll be having something that's not freely given. I bet that will make you feel like a big man with a big dick.” I raise my hands to make inverted commas in the air to drive my point home.

He shrugs and I want to fucking hit him. “I don't need you to make me feel like a man, Kayla. You simply amuse me. And it amuses me even more to think that I'll be fucking the memory of Timur Yakov out of you.”

My heart drops in my chest and I suddenly feel lightheaded. I mixture of rage and helplessness. I want to tell myself that it's Giselle's damn drug but I know that it's not. His words are a cruel reminder of the fate that awaits me if I

don't find some way out of this. I take a deep breath and try to steady myself.

“It will never happen,” I whisper, knowing how futile it is to even say it.

He raises an eyebrow as if daring me to contradict him. “Again, I love a challenge.”

I give him a cold look wondering where this whole conversation is going. If he's only here to make me feel threatened, he might as well give up and get the fuck out of my face. I refuse to be afraid of him.

“Yes, but there's no challenge here,” I retort. “You can take whatever you want – but there's nothing you can do that will ever make me forget Timur. He was twice the man you could ever be.”

The way he narrows his eyes at me tells me that I've struck a nerve. And I'm not wrong. The point is driven home when he snaps up a hand and takes my chin in a painful grip. “This ‘man’ you speak of died in a rain of lead, *kukolka*. By now his corpse is rotting in the earth, getting eaten by worms. And it happened because I gave the order.” He gets right in my face. “Do not fucking underestimate me.”

He pulls back again and I feel my throat work and my knees weaken.

Keep it together, Kayla!

But how do I do that when I'm looking into the eyes of pure evil? Vasiliy Koslov is a killer. A man who hurts women for sport. I just can't understand why he singled me out. Why me? Not that I would wish this fate on anyone else.

I lick my dry lips, flinching when I see how his eyes drop to watch the slight movement. "Why?" I say hoarsely when the silence drags on.

"Why what?"

"Why me? Why this?" I sweep an arm out to the room that has become my prison. "It's pretty obvious you can have anyone you want. Why would you want me?"

"Ah...so doubtful of your own charms, *kukolka?*" he says mockingly.

"I'm serious. Is this all just a game to you?" I shake my head. "Kidnapping me. Killing..." My voice catches. "Killing Timur? Did you really just do it all to entertain yourself?"

He observes me for a moment as if mulling it over. "Not entirely," he finally says. "If you must know, Yakov was

proving to be a complication. One I needed to resolve. You just gave me a good enough reason to go through with it. And this..." His lips quirk up. "This just made it more interesting. Watching him at war with himself over a cheap whore—"

"How dare—!" My words stop short as he puts a fingertip over my lips.

"Let us not fight over the details. You got naked for money, *kukolka*. You are no angel." Vasiliy gives another of those shrugs. "It was fascinating to watch the man risk everything for someone like you. And that intrigues me even more. You had my attention before. Now..." His fingertip runs down over my chin, traces the front of my throat and lower, stopping between my breasts. He watches its steady journey before meeting my eyes. "Now I know that I must have you. It's as simple as that."

I don't have an answer to that. I gulp, trying to swallow all the hate and the rage I've been bottling up since he locked me in here. I remain silent as he slips one of the straps of my nightdress from my shoulder. I clench my jaw as the fabric slips down my chest. As it drops past the curve of my breast, he traces a circle around my nipple.

Stop it!

Just fucking stop!

I'm not sure if the thought is aimed at him or at myself. I hate the fact that my skin puckers beneath his touch. I hate it even more that my body responds to him at all. When he cups my breast and grazes his thumb over my nipple, I groan and arch my back, a dull ache building between my thighs.

Why? Why am I reacting like this? I hate the man more than anything. I don't care how good-looking he is; he's an animal.

It's the drug, Kayla!

It's not my natural response kicking in. I have no choice in the matter – I've been doped. I have to remind myself that it's not me; it's that foul-tasting potion Giselle poured down my throat earlier. Still, it doesn't make me feel any less cheapened or disgusted by it all. I grit my teeth and screw my eyes shut to block out the sight of him. When I open them again, he smirks at me, and then steps away.

“Get some rest, Kayla,” he says eventually, putting distance between us. “You are going to need it.”

I still can't find words.

I swallow hard and say nothing. I just stare at him silently, clenching my fists and gritting my teeth as he steps out of the room and closes the door behind him.

As soon as I'm left alone, I turn on my heels and head to the bathroom, to splash cold water on my face. I know it won't help. Nothing can help me at this point.

There's no hope...

Drying myself off and heading back to the room, I curl up on the sofa and pull the blanket up over myself.

Every part of me hurts. And not just my head. The last traces of the drug are wearing off and the reality of my situation is sinking in. I know I am in deep trouble. Maybe I shouldn't have taunted him. But then again, I doubt it would have made any difference at all.

The man is an animal.

I sink deeper against the cushions, shut my eyes, and pray for sleep to come.

Of course, it doesn't.

I am not sure how long I stay there, but eventually, the door opens and Giselle steps in. I'm barely aware as she approaches and starts speaking to me. I just lie there, still

staring at the spot where Vasiliy Koslov had stood, my mind whirling with a thousand different thoughts and emotions.

I don't get it. I just don't understand why he wants me. I don't understand why he wants to hurt me. I don't understand how he could stand there and tell me that Timur is dead, and yet not seem to feel anything about it. And most of all, I don't understand why he would put all this effort into stealing my freedom and locking me in here.

But deep down, I do know one thing.

I'm not the type to go down without putting up a decent fight.

And I don't care if I die doing it.

Chapter Four

Vasiliy

What a fiery little slut.

I shake my head and grin as I walk away from her door. She will be mine, and it won't be long now. For all her bravado, I sense a weakening in her. Having Yakov behind her made her brazen, but now that he's gone, she's left adrift. Ripe for the plucking.

Or fucking.

I'm striding down the corridor, still thinking about my interaction with the woman when my phone rings. I look down and frown at the number.

"*Blyad!*" This isn't a call I want to take, but it's unavoidable. "*Da.*" I keep my reply short and sweet.

"Still fucking around with your shiny yellow metal, boy? Or wetting your dick in some juicy bitch when you should be working...for a change?" The voice on the other end

belongs to the only man on the planet I'll still allow to speak to me this way.

“The gold deals are in the pipeline, Abram,” I reply. I don't want to go into detail about this. Dealing in precious metals is a tricky business and the scams are rife – a fact I've been learning the hard way. The last knock I took still hurts where I feel it most – in my bank account. It won't happen again. “This latest deal is going to be the one. I can feel it.”

“I didn't call to speak about your fucking gold deals, Vasya,” Abram Obolensky snaps. “We have a consignment waiting for market. What are you doing about it?”

I pause for a moment, considering a sharp reply. It's no secret that Abram and I have a volatile relationship. An old friend of my father's, he uses that to try to impose his authority over me. But I'm not going to let him fuck with me.

“The consignment can wait,” I say firmly. “Right now, I'm more interested in clinching this gold deal. It'll be worth billions if it goes—”

Obolensky scoffs, interrupting me. “You'd turn away from a sure thing for the promise of billions that will probably never materialize? What would your father have said about that, Vasya?”

“In case you forgot, he was the one who gave me an appetite for gold, Abram.” My father had always told me our family was meant for more than petty crime. He taught me to have aspirations.

“Yes, but your father had the good sense to know when he was wasting his time. And money. Do you think he’d be happy to see you pouring your inheritance down the drain?”

I clench my jaw. “That’s irrelevant right now. He’s not here to say anything. And the friendship you shared doesn’t give you the right to make my decisions for me.”

“Perhaps it will not be me making the decisions.” His breath rasps over the line, the product of decades of heavy smoking.

“What are you getting at, Abram?”

“I’m saying that you’re going to draw heat, Vasya. We have a warehouse full of women waiting for auction. We can’t keep them there forever. It’s only a matter of time before the Feds find out.”

“It’ll keep,” I mutter.

“Keep? Are you out of your mind, *mudak*? We’re not talking about a batch of canned fruit. These girls need food.

Water. Fucking *toiletries*, if you expect them to be sellable. They're costing us money."

"Then make a fucking plan, Abram." I realize that I've slowed almost to a halt in the wide hallway. The opulent decor barely holds my attention right now. Intricate tapestries, and chandeliers dripping with crystal and gold. Every gleaming surface is designed to draw the eye. I don't give a shit, though. He's annoyed me too much to appreciate any of it. The man sets my teeth on edge. I start walking again, my footsteps ringing out on the marble tiles.

"What kind of plan would you like to make when they start dying, Vasiliy?" he bites out. "Aside from the expense, we'll be stuck with the motherfucking bodies!"

"They won't die, *dolboyob!* You know how to manage things. It's not the first time we've had to re-prioritize," I add.

"Re-prioritize?" He snorts. "What the fuck does that mean? I always told your father he'd done wrong to send you to that ivy-fucking-league college. You should have grown up among your kind. Learned the Bratva ways. You're soft, Vasiliy."

"Watch your fucking tongue or I will show you how wrong you are about me, Obolensky. Don't fucking test me."

Abram grunts something in Russian that I can't quite hear. I'm pretty sure it's offensive but I'm past caring about what he thinks. I'll get rid of him as soon as I don't need him anymore. But for now, he's useful.

"You know what needs to be done," he says, finally.

I take a deep breath. I know what he's asking, and I don't like it one bit. He wants me to refocus and get my hands dirty in a business I've grown to find tedious. Trafficking is a mug's game. A seedy business venture for the lowest rungs of our organization. I have better things to do.

"Do you really think I'm going to drop everything just because you say so?" I growl. I'm losing patience.

He snorts. "Do you think you have a choice? Do you want to be the leader of this organization or not?"

I pause, considering his words. Of course, I do, but there's no way I'll let him think he has any say in the matter. And from the way he's behaving, the man clearly believes he has some sort of power over me. Perhaps It's time to teach him a lesson.

"I do," I say eventually, keeping my voice low. "But as I said, I don't have time to divert my attention right now. I have

matters to attend to. There's too much at stake."

"What's at stake is your reputation. The reputation of the Bratva. What do you think your men will believe if they see you fucking around like this?"

I realize I've paused again. I resist the urge to sweep a giant vase off a side table.

Stay calm.

I grit my teeth.

"My men have faith in me."

"You sure of that?"

"Of course, I'm fucking sure! I trust my men with my life."

"But not with organizing this auction, no?" His tone grows dismissive. "You have nobody else who could put things in motion? Get the right buyers lined up?"

I stay silent because I can't say yes.

Abram continues, "A good leader knows that if he has the right people around him, he won't have to handle every task." There's a pause on the line. "You have such people,

yes?” He’s pressing this point because he’s trying to fuck with me.

“Yegor is my right-hand man,” I tell him. “You know this. And he’s crucial to my negotiations with the mining syndicates.”

I hear him blow out an exasperated breath. “I don’t want to hear about that bullshit, Vasya. Are you saying you have only one useful man in your entire organization?”

I don’t answer him right away, because there’s one name that immediately springs to mind.

Timur Yakov.

Too bad the fucker is dead. And he deserved it. God only knows how many times he betrayed me before I tipped his hand and got him to show his true colors.

Still, the fact remains that he was a highly effective motherfucker. I think of the two idiots who led the team I sent to kill him. It makes me grind my teeth.

I clench my fists, anger seething within me as I recall their ineptitude.

“I will handle this...myself.” I keep my voice level.

“Then handle it,” Abram adds testing my patience further. “The vultures are circling, Vasya.”

“*Da.*” It pisses me the fuck off to feel like I’m giving in to him. But the man has a point. If our enemies think there’s a chance of muscling into our turf, they won’t hesitate to do it. “I will let you know when things are ready.”

“I’ll be waiting,” he says unnecessarily. I grunt in response. As I end the call, my mind churns with calculations and strategies. The loss of Yakov still stings, but it was a necessary purge of weakness and incompetence. The motherfucker would have been my best if he knew how to follow my orders. But he didn’t. And from his ashes, a new empire will rise, one where loyalty and efficiency reign supreme.

I huff out a breath and continue my walk down the hallway, my steps echoing with purpose. Obolensky wants a fucking auction? I’ll show him something that will make his head spin.

If anyone out there thinks I’ve lost my edge, I’ll show them soon enough just how fucking wrong they are. Only the strong and truly ruthless can emerge victorious in the world I live in.

And I am going to be the last man standing.

Chapter Five

Kayla

A few days later

I stumble slightly as Giselle leads me into a room filled with sunshine and surrounded by greenery. I've not been to this part of the building before. But then again, I've barely made it out of my suite these past few days.

Vasya.

He insists that I call him that. My only attempt at resistance earned me another blinding slap that left a palm print on my face. He has visited me in my room these past days but has never done more than touch me. Each time I've been foggy with Giselle's drug, which always leaves me strangely desperate to feel his hands on me. Each time, he's left me burning. Although I can tell that my body is responding to the drugs, not him.

The fog has diminished today. Giselle has been giving me less of whatever is in that bottle. But he's still not happy with the result. When he left yesterday, he'd stopped Giselle with a hand on her arm.

"If she's like this when I see her again, I will kill you," he'd said softly. It was a voice as smooth as silk, but she'd blanched. This morning, when I'd woken, she was standing at the bedside with a teaspoon. Just a sip.

"Drink," she muttered, and I diligently swallowed.

The warmth would flood me soon, but this time, I could make sense of my surroundings. A day without oblivion brought other things, though. I'd wept again at the memory of the man they had stripped from my world. I don't want to think about it, but it's harder than before.

What I've lost.

What could have been.

And what lies ahead...

And what lies ahead this morning is yet another moment of confusion for me. I step into the room and look around. In a sunny alcove is a round table set with white linen and silver cutlery. On one side, Vashya is seated, dressed in white linen

and reading a newspaper. Sitting across from him is a small dark-haired child toying with a plate of eggs.

“Ah, Kayla,” he says as I arrive beside them. “We have just sat down to breakfast. Join us.” He pulls out a chair for me and then sees that I’m settled before resuming his own. I could be part of a small family group at a high-end hotel or in some upmarket suburban home.

The child turns curious eyes to me as I sit down, and I’m grateful they’ve dressed me in something more suitable than the satiny robes I’ve worn these past days. Today I’m in a crisp cream linen lounge suit. My hair has been brushed into dark waves over my shoulders.

“Kayla, I would like you to meet Nika. She is my very special guest,” says Vashya. I turn to smile at the child. Her elfin features are dominated by intense dark eyes that unsettle me a little.

“Hello, Nika,” I say, smiling gently at the little girl. There’s an air of fragility to her that tugs at something in me. Beyond this, however, is the bizarreness of the situation. I’ve spent the past few days seeing the dark underbelly of this sprawling mansion. Here, I’m confused. This child, this room, this moment... Nothing fits.

Vasya has waved to a nearby server in crisp livery who seems to have been waiting for me to arrive because the dark-haired man snaps to attention. He heads over swiftly with a tray bearing a variety of breakfast choices. I realize that I'm expected to make a selection.

"I have decided that you and Nika will spend some time together," Vasya says as I reach for a bowl of granola and yogurt. I nod, though I'm confused. Why would he want me to spend time with a strange child? "Nika has been very sad these past days. Haven't you, Nika?" he addresses the last to the child. She's still dragging a fork through her eggs, which she's barely touched. It occurs to me that her face is pale and drawn. Dark smudges shadow her eyes, which continue to draw me. "Will you tell Kayla why you are sad, Nika?" Vasya asks, reaching for a piece of bacon, and popping it into his mouth. He licks his fingers.

"My papa went to heaven," Nika says simply, and I feel my heart clench.

"Oh, sweetie, that's awful. I'm so sorry," I murmur.

"And will you tell Kayla what happened to him, Nika?" Vasya prompts, reaching for another piece of bacon.

Nika's lips pinch together. I wonder why he's making her go through this. "He was running away from the men. So, they shot him," she whispers. I set my spoon down with a clatter and stare at her.

"And why can't your mama take care of you now, Nika?" Vasya asks. I'm still blinking at the little girl, but I spin my head to shoot a look at him. His smile is cold and cruel.

"She's in heaven too," says the child quietly.

"Oh, Nika..." I whisper.

Those eyes.

I know those eyes.

Nika looks up and stares at me. And something is sinking in.

"Will you tell Kayla what your mama's name was, Nika?" he asks.

"My papa said her name was Tanya. I don't remember her much anymore."

I'm still silent. My head is weaving through a tangle of knotted threads as I pull the details together.

“And what was your papa’s name, Nika?” he asks.

“Your papa who got shot by the men.”

“Timur,” Nika whispers. “Timur Yakov.”

No.

My mouth drops open and the world starts spinning around me. I need to grab the side of the table to make sure I don’t lose balance. I feel like I can’t breathe.

“And you are all alone now,” says Vasiliy. Nika looks down at her plate. “That is why I have brought Kayla to you. To be your friend.” He smiles, as if this solves everything.

It doesn’t!

My world just turned on its head!

Nika looks up at me. I fight back tears as she stares at me through eyes that are so much like her father’s it hurts.

“You will take care of Nika and be her friend, yes?”

Vashya turns to me. I nod. I bite down on my lip so hard I can taste blood. “You don’t want anything bad to happen to Nika, do you, Kayla?” He winks at me. His message is clear. I must abide his wishes, otherwise... I don’t even want to think about it.

How could he...

That fucking monster.

“No, I do not,” I say through gritted teeth. I feel like I’m going to throw up.

“That settles it,” He smiles and sits back in his chair, that cold smile still marring the beauty of his face. “You will join me in my suite in half an hour. You can show me some of those special moves you learned up on that stage.

Understood?”

“You’re a monster,” I hiss at him. I shove my chair back abruptly, aim a small smile at the child, and storm out of the room. I lost my appetite.

“*Cherie!*” Giselle whispers in alarm as I push the door open and charge past her. She’s half skipping to keep up with me as I stride along the hallways back to my room. “*Cherie*, what is it?”

My chest is heaving as I get into my suite and slam the door shut behind me. Giselle makes it in a fraction of a second before it slams shut in her face. I round on her, eyes blazing. I know what I have to do now.

“Do you have more?” I demand.

“More? More what, *cherie*?” she asks, trying to catch her breath.

“That stuff... The stuff in the bottle you keep pouring down my throat.”

She shakes her head in confusion and then quickly scuttles across the room to her bag. Before she gets back to me, I reach her and snatch it from her hand.

“*Cherie*, take care, you must—”

But it’s too late. I uncap it and tip the entire contents into my mouth. I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and throw the bottle across the room.

I will show that motherfucker...

“I need to get ready,” I snap and start yanking at the buttons of my shirt.

I know what I must do.

I’ll do whatever I must to protect Timur’s daughter.

And if Vasiliy thinks he’s going to have me shaking in my shoes, he’s got another thing coming.

Chapter Six

Vasiliy

“I’m here.” The voice rings out across the room, and I turn my head.

“Kayla!” I say. I spring onto my feet beside the sofa I’d been lounging on. I’m always in a good mood after breakfast. And looking at the woman walking into the room in the revealing robe just made my day even better.

Flanked by a pair of guards, her hands are cuffed behind her, but her chin is held high. She meets my eye with a gaze that’s almost defiant.

This is going to be so fucking sweet.

For a moment, we stand silently. I’m close enough to touch her, but I don’t. It will draw out the tension, and that suits me just fine. Her pupils are dilated. Her nipples poke sharply against the black satin of her robe. I suspect it’s a result of Giselle’s little aphrodisiac concoction, but either way, I don’t care.

I'm having her today.

"Take off the cuffs," I say to the guard behind her without breaking eye contact. "And then get the fuck out."

Moments later, she's free.

And we're alone.

She raises her hands and rubs her wrists, her eyes narrowed on me.

"Let's get this over with, you sick fuck," she says curtly.

I chuckle. "Oh, *kukolka*, I love it when you talk dirty!"

She sets her jaw, but I see her throat move as she swallows. I trace the movement with my fingertips. I slide my fingers down her chest and slip them beneath the black robe. Her chest heaves as I cup her breast. She makes a small sound as I pinch her nipple. I untie the sash at her waist and push the robe over her shoulders.

She shifts her feet slightly as I look down at her smooth, creamy nakedness. Her breasts rise and fall deliciously. I want to bury my face there and devour her; so much soft flesh. I take it in my hands and squeeze lightly, letting it spill between my fingers. So fucking lush...and it's all mine.

I release her and watch the globes sway, then run my hands further down. Her breath starts to come in short sharp gasps as I drop my hand between her thighs and delve into the wet folds of her cunt.

“Oh, *kukolka*, all for me?” I chuckle at the moist sounds my fingers make. She sucks in a breath.

“Fuck you!” she hisses, and I laugh louder.

“Yes, that’s exactly what you’re about to do. And from the looks of this,” I raise glistening fingers to my lips, “you’re going to enjoy it.”

She shakes her head, but her cheeks are flushed, lips parting. I drop my head and cover her mouth with my own. For a minute, I think she’s going to pull away, but then her lips part beneath mine. And then I feel her teeth graze my lip as she catches it between them sharply.

“*Suka! Little bitch.*” I laugh as I pull away. She flattens her hands against my chest and then curls her fingers. Her nails are digging into me as she leans in and nips at my lip again.

I push my knee between hers and feel her press her mound against the muscle of my thigh. I move back a little,

reach for the hem of my shirt, and tug it abruptly over my head. She's glassy-eyed and breathless as she stares down at my bare chest.

"Touch me," I say, expecting her to refuse – that would suit me just fine. At this point, I'll happily force her to do as I say. She's silent for a moment, running her eyes over my torso. Then she slides her hands from my shoulders down my chest, tracing the muscles. She draws small circles around my nipples, making me groan as they pucker. When she rakes her nails over them, my groan deepens. I feel my cock stiffen.

I run my hand into her hair and pull her face against my chest. Her tongue flicks out, and then she nips at me. When I tighten my grip, her teeth sink in deeper, and I chuckle.

"*Da...* harder," I say, looking down at her, and she glances up and narrows her eyes. Her lips are still on my flesh. I pull her hair more firmly. She flinches, but her cheeks have flushed brighter. Her teeth sink in deep enough to leave a mark, and I shudder. I press my cock against her hip and revel in the combined sensation of pleasure and pain.

I reach down between us to where her cunt is pressed against me. The slickness of her has soaked into the fabric of my sweatpants. I shove my fingers roughly into her. When my

thumb finds her clit, she arches her back and moans. I lean forward to run my mouth down her exposed throat. Sucking and biting, I feel the hoarseness of her breath beneath my lips. Her juices are trickling onto my palm. There's no mistaking her response to me.

“Oh, *kukolka*, I'm going to fuck you so hard,” I say against her ear. She makes a low sound in the back of her throat.

“Goddamn you!” she hisses at me. “You don't fucking own me!” There's rage in her words, but there's something else there, too. A challenge. I like a challenge. I'm about to laugh again when her palms hit me hard in the chest. She's shoving me against the chair behind us. The element of surprise is on her side. When the edge hits the back of my knees, I feel myself dropping into it. And she's following me down. Her hands still rove my chest and belly, leaving throbbing red welts in their wake. Her mouth and teeth follow.

“*Blyad!* Yes, like that!” I grunt out. She's setting me on fire in more ways than one. When she reaches into the front of my pants, I'm almost afraid I'll explode in her palms. She stares into my face as she frees my cock.

“Is this what you want you sick piece of shit?” she sneers. She straddles my thighs and is hovering over my waist. The smooth lips of her cunt are brushing my belly. My breath is coming in gasps. “Is it?” she repeats. Her eyes are filled with hate, but I don’t care. It’s not her eyes I’m interested in.

“Shut up and fuck me,” I growl back and run my hands up her back, pulling her down toward me. She wavers for a second, her fist around my shaft, holding the head of my cock against her slick entrance. I pull down more firmly, but she resists. The little bitch is going to make me wait, goddamn it. I’m panting like a horny teenager by the time she sinks down and engulfs me.

“*Gavno!*” I bite out, squeezing my eyes shut. The heat of her is searing as she begins a slow rocking motion, sliding up and down my shaft. I hear her give a throaty groan, and I open my eyes. Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes glittering.

“Don’t you fucking look at me,” she snarls. Her hand fists into my hair and she pulls my head forward against her chest. I bury my face in that soft, jiggling flesh, sucking at her skin. It’s like being consumed by sexuality. She’s grinding a rhythm against me that’s taking me along with it.

“*Bozhe moy!*” I say through gritted teeth.

I've been imagining this for too damn long. And for a moment, there's nothing but the mind-numbing intensity of her heat. I grit my teeth, feeling her slide up and then back down. Her cunt clamps tightly around me as I try to pump up into her, but she's setting the pace. Her breath is coming in shuddering gasps.

"Ahhh... *Blyad!* That's good," I grind out. Her movements have become less rhythmic against me. She arches and drops her hands from my head. When her nails rake over my back, I know she's leaving trails that will last for days. Then a spasm within her ripples up my shaft. The force of it is enough to drag me to the edge. I grunt as the pleasure of it erupts in sharp, searing bursts up my cock. And then I'm pouring into her.

"Jesus!" The word is torn from me. I try to catch my breath as the sensations slowly dissipate. "Fuck, no wonder Yakov wanted you to himself. Your cunt is like hot fucking heaven." The stinging slap to my face leaves me reeling. If I hadn't just had the best orgasm I can remember, I would return the favor. But as it is, I taste the blood and grin at her. "Good for you too, *kukolka?*" I chuckle hoarsely.

“Fuck off,” she mutters, sliding off my cock with a wet pop and dismounting me. She gives me a view of her gleaming pussy as she bends to retrieve her gown.

“Goddamn it, that is a beautiful sight,” I mutter, looking for something to wipe myself off with. I straighten out my pants then reach for the intercom buzzer to get Yegor to bring in the security team I’ve been waiting for. It takes less than a minute for the crew to arrive. Kayla’s wrapping the robe tightly around herself just as Yegor steps in.

“Get me out of here,” she says to Yegor, who looks at me curiously. I give a curt nod, and they are out of the room in an instant, with Kayla slamming the door behind her. She leaves nothing behind her except her sweet scent.

“Hot little bitch,” I chuckle and turn my attention to the two men who have been waiting downstairs for me. But from the expression on their faces, the news is not good. It takes me less than a second to realize they fucked up, once again. “I am not seeing a fucking bag with a head in it,” I say to Sergei as I straighten my pants and slump down onto my chair. As I’d suspected, there are teeth marks on my chest.

“We went back there, Mr. Koslov. The scene had been cleared,” Sergei explains. He’s waited too damn long to come

back to share this news with me. I know what that means.

Despite the warm afterglow of sex, I feel my rage rise.

“Who cleared it?” I ask softly. I can smell her scent on my fingers, but it’s merely an annoying distraction now.

“The...the paramedics, Mr. Koslov.” He’s struggling to keep his voice steady.

“The paramedics?” I repeat.

Paramedics.

Not the fucking coroner.

Yegor has returned and is standing behind them impassively, his hands clasped in front of him.

“The fucking paramedics?!” I roar. The violence of my tone is unexpected. Both men visibly jump.

“Mr- Mr. Koslov, we...we...traced them to the local hospital. He’s there. We can get to him!”

“No, you fucking can’t! *Debil yobani!* You motherfucking idiot!” I scream at him. “It is too late for that now!” These cretins have exposed me and my organization enough already. For a second, I’m looking at the pair of them through a blood-mist of fury. But losing control is a weakness so, I pull myself back together. “Yegor will take care of it,” I

finally say. “But you are not off the hook. What did I tell you to do if you could not bring me proof that Yakov was dead?”

Boris takes a step back but bumps into the wall of muscle that is my right-hand man. He swallows hard.

“You...you said you would expect me to...” Sergei glances at the man shrinking back beside him. “To give you Boris’s head,” he mutters hoarsely. I raise my eyebrow in question. “Mr. Koslov, I—”

“Your position here is terminated,” I say. “Kill him,” I add, but I’m no longer speaking to Sergei. Yegor moves so swiftly it’s impossible to tell where the glittering blade has come from. With a smooth sweep of his wrist, he opens a wide slash that extends from Boris’s left ear to his right. The man makes a bleating sound and clasps a hand to his throat. His lips move silently as blood pumps through his clutching fingers.

“Mr. Koslov! Boss, please—!” Sergei is babbling.

“You know what to do, Sergei.” I fold my arms over my chest.

Yegor steps forward and passes his evil-looking knife to Sergei. The knife is curved and serrated, with a black handle that is etched with a pattern of silver flames. Its machete-like

blade glints in the light, sharp enough to draw blood with a single swipe. With trembling hands, Sergei takes the blade. His eyes dart from me to Yegor before he looks to where Boris is thrashing like a fish on the floor, trying to stem the flow of his lifeblood.

It's too late for him.

"Sergei..." When I say his name, he knows it's a warning. Dropping to his knees beside Boris, he grasps a handful of the gasping man's hair. Boris gives a terrified cry just a moment before Sergei saws the blade through his windpipe, severing his throat cleanly.

"That's a good sharp edge, *bratok*," I say coolly to Yegor, who nods, his expression impassive.

"Carbon," he responds, watching the scene unfolding.

Boris has slumped limply, deader than a doornail as Sergei hacks at the man's neck. He gags as he hits the spinal column, his hands and face covered in the blood that has spurted.

It's an excellent knife. It's not long before Boris's head is severed right from his body. Sergei staggers to his feet,

retching as he holds the head by a bloody mass of tangled hair. I look into the lifeless eyes and give a satisfied nod.

“Very good,” I say. “Now it’s your turn.” I shoot a meaningful look at my second-in-command, who dips his head slightly.

“What?” Sergei’s voice is shrill. “But... but boss, I did what you said. I did what you said!” He’s shrieking now, but I am no longer listening.

I watch without comment as Yegor steps forward and grasps the screaming man by the back of the neck. Sergei puts up a fight, but he’s no match for my battle-honed security specialist. In a matter of seconds, Sergei’s screams have become gurgling cries, and then a final gasping wheeze. It takes far less time for Yegor to remove the man’s head. He really is very good at his job. It’s why I need more men like him on my team.

As for these two idiots, they deserved their fate.

“*Otlichnaya rabota.*” I nod. “Well done. Now get this mess cleaned up.” I say to Yegor, grimacing at the gore spattered over my expensive rug.

Yegor nods and I turn and leave the room.

Chapter Seven

Kayla

I'm bracing for the worst when I'm led to Vasiliy's quarters once again.

When the thugs push me to enter the room, I feel myself hesitate. He's sitting behind a wide desk at the far end of the room. My tormentor is dressed in a charcoal gray suit with a pale gold tie. The color picks up the golden tints in his hair. Of course, he looks like a freaking cover model. Of course, I know better. What lurks beneath the surface is rotten to its core.

He glances up from a file on the desk in front of him as I walk further into the room. "Good morning, *kukolka*."

"Morning," I respond tentatively. I'd been expecting a repeat of the last time I was brought here...when he'd demanded that I fuck him, and I'd pushed him down and screwed him on the chair that I can see to the left of me. My cheeks flame.

“You slept well?” he asks, sitting back in his tall seat.

Slept well?

*Since when does this piece of human garbage care
about how I slept?*

“Um...yeah.” I nod instead of telling him to go fuck himself.

“And you have had your breakfast. I trust it was good?”

“Sure,” I say. Why is he being so polite? I gnaw my lip, glancing around the room. What is he up to this time?

“Excellent.” He rises and moves around the desk, heading toward me. The suit is cut perfectly to show off his broad shoulders and trim waist. As he reaches me, he strokes my cheek.

Okay.

Here we go again...

I grit my teeth, waiting for him to tell me to strip or something. He doesn't. What he does is worse.

“I'd like you to go back to your room and gather your belongings. You will be moving into my suite today.”

To his what?

I jerk as if he'd hit me. "What?" I echo my thoughts.

He's watching his fingers as they trace the line of my cheekbone. "You heard me. I wish to have you close."

"Close? You've got to be joking," I blurt, and immediately regret it. It's always my mouth that gets me into trouble. But he can't seriously expect me to share a room with him.

Why wouldn't he, Kayla?

Of course, he would. Having me nearby would simply be convenient for him. For a moment, I wonder how long I can keep doing this without breaking. It was clear from the start that the man plans to use me as some sort of sex toy to entertain himself. It's not like I should be surprised. But having to go through with it for days and weeks without breaking, is a whole other ballgame. Either way, I can't afford to break down. I won't. Nika's life is all in my hands now. And I won't let her down. Not just for her, but for Timur.

You can do this girl.

You have to.

I set my jaw straight as I stare into Vasily's eyes.

“No, I am not joking.” He’s still watching his fingers.
It’s creeping me out.

“Why?” I lick my lips. “Why do you want me there?”

“Is that not obvious, *kukolka*?” His lips curl up. “I want to fuck you. Whenever I wish. So you will share my bed.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

He gives a snort. “You know the answer to that.”

“But why can’t I just stay in the room I’m already in and you can...visit me there? Surely you don’t want me hanging around all the time?” I fumble for reasons why this would be a problem for him. Not that I expect him to change his mind, but it’s worth a shot.

“I will decide what does and does not suit me. And now, I want you in my suite.” He drops his hand abruptly and turns away, moving back to his seat. I let out a breath as he puts distance between us.

I feel myself falter for a moment before I gather my bearings.

Stay strong, Kayla.

Think about Nika.

Giselle's words keep ringing through my head. "*Mr. Koslov is a man of particular tastes,*" she'd said.

I wonder what that actually means. I'm starting to get the feeling I've gotten off lightly so far. But if I'm at his beck and call twenty-four-seven, what horrors lurk in store for me?

My stomach churns as I allow myself to contemplate it further. My mind keeps racing as I frantically try to find other ways to get out of this. Because, aside from being at the mercy of this sick bastard, living in close quarters means there's no way I'll get a chance to make my escape from this place.

My heart sinks.

"I just think..." I begin, hating that my voice is hoarse and my mouth is dry.

"You're not here to think," he snaps. "Now do as I tell you. Or you'll watch as I have Yegor drop Nika in the pool and let her drown."

I suck in a sharp breath, feeling my blood running cold. "You wouldn't!"

"Want to test me?" Without another word to me, he glances over at the looming presence who's never far away from him. "Take her. Make sure she gets her things together.

See that she settles in,” he tells Yegor, who gives a curt nod. I’m still reeling at how callously he’s just threatened to murder a child. I barely notice as Yegor puts a hand to my back and guides me to the door.

Once in my room, I’m still shocked by it all. Thankfully there’s not much in the way of “belongings.” Just the clothes I arrived in, the sleepwear that had been brought for me, and some basic toiletries. With a small bag in my hand, I remain mute as I’m led down a wide hall to a pair of huge white double doors. Yegor opens it and waits as I enter the suite.

Just as I expected, the place is sickeningly opulent. Except there’s no doubt that this is a man’s room.

I look around the room, taking in the luxurious surroundings; the plush carpets, towering windows with velvet curtains, and expensive furniture that gleams in the light from the chandelier above me. It’s almost too much – too perfect – and it makes me feel uneasy.

Vasiliy must have spent a small fortune on this place; he obviously doesn’t do things by halves when it comes to money or luxury.

All the money in the world doesn’t buy class.

Or conscience.

I have to do this.

For Nika.

Her life depends on you.

I try not to think further about what he might do if I disobey and focus on surviving instead.

It's easier said than done. I've been in this room only a few minutes and already I feel as though I'm part of some extravagant experiment. Like a lab rat in a maze, at the mercy of some mad scientist testing how far I can survive their sick trial.

A dull thud behind me reminds me that Yegor is still nearby. I spin my head to face him as he shuts the door behind us.

"I think I can take it from here," I say drily.

"Mr. Koslov instructed me to make sure you settle in." He stares at me impassively. I huff out a breath, empty my bag unceremoniously onto the floor, and flop onto the black satin coverlet of the king-sized bed.

Black satin.

Who actually does that?

“There, settled. Happy?” I glare at him. He shrugs as he scoops up my scattered belongings, walks across the room, and deposits them into the top drawer of a dresser.

“Mr. Koslov will be here when he’s ready.” He turns to face the door, opening it.

I stare at him sullenly. “Tell him to take his time.”

The door clicks shut behind him and I lift my head to take in the room again. The windows at the far end overlook the gardens I’ve seen from the house. But unlike the ones in my previous room, these windows don’t have bars on them.

For a second, my heart races.

Sitting up, I rise to my feet and walk quickly toward them. It’s only when I’m close enough for my skin to be warmed by the morning light that’s filtering through that I begin to falter.

You could get out there, Kayla!

I stop, staring out at the promise of sweet freedom.

Go on!

Just do it!

I glance back at the bed, trying not to think of the indignities I will experience there.

I look out of the window again.

...you'll watch as I have Yegor drop the girl in the pool and let her drown...

I can't do it. He'll kill her.

Choking down tears, I turn back to the bed to await my fate.

Even if I could escape, my conscience would never let me live with myself.

I'm stuck here.

Chapter Eight

Kayla

It's been two weeks since that day, and I still can't make sense of it all; it's been like some twisted honeymoon I don't want to be a part of. Giselle's strange drinks, then hours of frenzied sex, interspersed with dinners and gifts. And each morning and afternoon, I go down to the sunroom to spend time with Nika.

She's precious.

She's the single light in the dark turmoil that has become my world. A reminder of why I've become what I am now. I don't know how long Vasya will tolerate our arrangement or even how long I'll hold his interest, though. After that, I don't even want to know what's going to happen to us.

I stand obediently and watch him lounging on a sofa, talking on the phone. It makes me edgy. These calls, when he speaks in Russian, send him into a blinding rage. And I don't know when he's going to turn that rage on me. I duck my head

as I pass him, trying to be invisible, but he grabs my wrist as I move. I stop short. He looks up at me and tilts his head in question.

“Going to Nika,” I mouth, and he nods. Why the hell he cares is beyond me. And it’s not like I’m going far. I never go anywhere without Yegor on my tail anyway. The man creeps me out, but he keeps his distance, thank God.

The voices rise again as I open the door. When I close it behind me, there’s a shout and a crash, and I suck in a breath. I hurry down to where I know she’ll be waiting, every stride away bringing a sense of relief.

“Kayla!” she calls as I walk through the door. She leaps up and sprints over, flinging her arms around my waist and pressing her cheek against my stomach.

“Hello, Nika,” I say with a smile. “Ready for our ‘ladies’ lunch’?” I give her a wink. I’m trying so desperately to make things seem normal here. It’s not exactly easy given our circumstances. Not to mention that she reminds me of her father so much, it hurts.

She nods eagerly and leads me to a beautifully set table out on the patio. It’s a glorious day out, and one of the staff has moved an oversized umbrella over the table. As I take a

seat, the man who first served us breakfast days before bustles around, arranging our napkins and filling our glasses with water.

“Isn’t this fancy?” I whisper to Nika, who grins and sips from her glass. “So, what do you recommend on the menu?” There’s no actual menu, but it’s nice to pretend.

“Burgers,” she says cheerfully. “I always ask for burgers.”

“I suppose there’s nothing else, right?” I grin. We haven’t shared many meals together – Vasiliy insists that I “dine” with him, like some sort of twisted married couple. It makes me sick. Normally Nika and I explore the garden or stretch out on the floor and invent conversations between the two tattered dolls she carries about.

“Nope, I can have anything I want,” she answers. “I just like the burgers. They’re special here.”

“Then burgers it is,” I concur, and our attendant moves off so we can chat. I’ve kept our conversations carefully neutral during our interactions. I’m afraid of pushing her to a place of grief, which I can sense most of the time. I’m also terrified that I’ll let slip some of my own darkness. Whatever

happens, I can't let her know what kind of place this is. It's too much for a child to understand.

“When I grow up, I'll eat burgers every day,” she's saying now.

“Really? Don't you think that might get boring?” I chuckle.

“Nope. I can have different toppings each time. Pickles one day, cheese another. Maybe even mushrooms.”

“Mushrooms? Do you like those?” I ask.

“Nuh-uh, I hate them!” she pulls a face. “But when I'm big, maybe I won't.”

There's a rattle of dishes beside us as our food arrives and is set in front of us. I reach for a French fry, but Nika puts her hand on my arm.

“Wait,” she murmurs. I glance at her and frown. It hadn't occurred to me that she may have been raised to say Grace before a meal. I fold my hands and bow my head, but she tugs at my sleeve. Her eyes are on the man walking off, and as he moves out of sight, she points at my fries. I don't understand. She carefully raises one of her own. My eyes widen as I see what's beneath.

Be brave.

The words have been written in ketchup on the plate below the carefully positioned food. Nika aims a small smile at me, and I lift several of my own fries.

We're coming.

I drop my fork with a clatter, then quickly retrieve it before I draw any attention.

She dips a fry into the letters and swirls them around. "My papa taught me my letters when I was little," she says. "He told me I'm smart."

"You certainly are, Nika." I glance around quickly, swirling my own message away. "Does this happen every time?" I ask, and she nods.

"Most days," she says, reaching for her burger with both hands and stretching her mouth for a bite.

"What have the messages said?" I'm too afraid to do more than whisper even though nobody is within earshot.

"Different things," she says around a mouthful of food. "One said, 'Be good,' which is silly because I'm always good. One said, 'U R safe,' and that made me laugh. I know that's not how you spell it!"

My head is reeling. Someone's in contact. Someone from beyond the walls. Or not, since these meals are obviously being prepared on the premises. There's help inside here. I wrack my brain, frantically trying to imagine who it might be.

Holy shit!

We might have a chance to get out of here, after all. I need the next message.

"But the best one came yesterday," Nika keeps talking. She's scooping ketchup onto a fry and painting on the plate with it. "Yesterday's message said, 'He's alive.' I liked that one best."

I clap a hand over my mouth and I feel tears running into my eyes. She cocks her head as she looks at me. "You're funny, Kayla," she giggles, then puts a hand over her eyes.

I bite back a sob.

Oh, my God.

Is that possible?

Can Timur be alive?

Chapter Nine

Kayla

Despite the fact that I enjoy Nika's company, our lunch drags on forever.

Still, I manage to control my urge to demand answers from her. How could she know more, after all? By the time I head back to Vasiliy's suite, my mind is a whirlwind of mad thoughts, vain hopes, and frantic silent prayers.

Alive!

Can that really be true?

I don't know if I want to allow myself to believe it. I don't think I could take it if it turned out to be untrue. I rush through the corridors, my heart beating faster with every step.

The doors to Vasiliy's suite are ajar and I slip inside, my eyes darting about in case he's around. It's not like him to be here at this time of the day, but there's no accounting for changes in plans. The man is a law unto himself.

Asshole.

Finding the place empty, I head to a chair beside one of the windows that hint at so much freedom. I slump down into it and rub my face with both hands.

Could he be alive?

My stomach knots at the thought of it. Though even if he is, what could he possibly do? I'm locked in this fortress. Beyond his reach. Imagining him coming to my rescue brings a new set of fears. If they didn't kill him before, they'll certainly do it if he comes here. I've seen the security around this place. It's like Fort freaking Knox. Armed men patrol every square foot of the estate. Even now, I can hear booted footsteps passing the door.

He can't come here!

My heart thunders as I remember the sight of Timur collapsing in a pool of blood. That can never happen again. Not for me.

But for Nika?

She is his only daughter, and he's alive...

He'll come. Maybe not for me, but definitely for her.

"Oh lord, I feel sick," I whisper into the silence of the room. It's not an exaggeration. As I sit there, heat washes over

me and my skin prickles uncomfortably. Before I realize it, I'm fighting down bile.

“Shit!” I'm barely on my feet and racing for the bathroom before I start gagging. I collapse onto the floor in front of the toilet and throw up every bit of the lunch I just shared with Nika. I sit back on my heels, panting, but the sour stench has me gagging again. Buckling forward, I don't stop retching until my stomach is empty.

“Holy... shit,” I groan, sinking onto my butt beside the toilet and leaning against the cool tiles of the wall. “What the hell was that?” I grit out, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand. It takes me a while to get my breath back; I feel as wrung out as a wet rag. Finally dragging myself to my feet, I lean over the wash basin, rinse out my mouth, and splash my face.

The shock of cold water brings me back to reality. I take a deep breath and try to calm myself down. I can't be freaking out like this. Not when Nika needs me.

When I look up, my reflection stares back at me. Pale skin and huge eyes that are filled with fear and worry. I barely recognize myself anymore. I can't believe how violently I reacted to the thought of Timur being gunned down again.

Then again, I feel queasy a lot lately. Between Giselle's drugs, and having to tolerate Vasiliy touching me... I shudder. It's hardly surprising I've reacted badly. I'm surprised I can even eat at all.

I reach for a towel to dry off, then open the medicine cabinet in front of me. I'm about to take out the mouthwash, but stop short when something snares my attention.

It's a box of tampons Giselle had provided along with some other basic necessities.

It's unopened.

"Fuck!" My stomach starts churning again, and I take a deep breath, willing it to settle.

How long has it been since that first day I was abducted?

One month?

Two?

I feel myself go pale as a realization begins to dawn.

Shit, shit, shit!

Time seems to have melded into a long string of days and nights, but I haven't had a period since they took me. I've

been so focused on survival, that I hadn't even realised it.

Oh.

My.

God.

I rub a hand over my eyes.

“It’s the stress,” I tell my reflection. The Kayla looking back at me doesn’t seem convinced. “It must be the stress!”

My heart is pounding, and my skin feels clammy. The doctor who had examined me when I’d first arrived at Timur’s home had given me contraceptive pills. But with all that’s happened, it’s been weeks since I’ve taken them. Weeks in which I was having regular sex with Timur...

And Vasiliy.

Dear God!

My stomach lurches again, but now there’s nothing to throw up. I sink onto the edge of the tub and drop my head into my hands.

That’s exactly how Giselle finds me when she walks into the room after what feels like a lifetime.

“*Cherie...?*” She continues to use the term of endearment even though there’s never been any love lost between us. I look up at her and for a moment, we lock eyes. “What is it?” she presses.

I shake my head and try to find the words, but my throat feels like it’s been sealed shut. I can’t tell her. At least not yet. I don’t trust her, and even if I did, what good would it do? She practically delivered me to that madman.

There must be something else I can say that will bring me the answers I need without having to admit my fears of pregnancy.

“I’m just feeling a bit unwell,” I finally manage, forcing myself to look away from Giselle’s probing gaze. I set a hand over my stomach. “Something I ate, maybe.”

“Do you want me to get you anything?” she asks cautiously, as if she knows there’s more going on than just an upset stomach.

I shake my head. I’m not sure what I need right now, but I know that nothing can solve the nausea and fear gnawing away at my insides.

“No, thank you,” I say.

Giselle nods and takes a step back toward the door before turning back to me with a worried look in her eyes.

“Cherie... Are you sure there’s nothing I can do?”

Of course, there’s something you can do!

You can get me the fuck out of here!

I want to scream at her, but I know it would be pointless. I’ve already tried that route. She wouldn’t bite. Not to mention that she’s as stuck in this place as I am. Except she seems to be a lot more accepting of her fate.

I shake my head, swallowing hard and forcing myself to meet her gaze. Part of me is convinced she’ll see the truth in my eyes if she looks long enough.

“Some tea, perhaps?” She won’t let up, dammit.

I huff out a breath and open my mouth, then close it again. I need answers. I can’t let this thing hang over my head without knowing for sure.

How would that help anyway?

Even though I don’t know the answer to that question, I know that I have to find out. Vasiliy may be an animal, but perhaps if he thought he had a child on the way...?

Fuck!

What am I thinking?

“*Cherie?*” Giselle’s voice is firmer now. She definitely knows something is up, because she’s turned from the door and is walking back to me. “There is something wrong. I’m not a fool. Speak to me.”

Tell her, for fuck’s sake!

Just get it over with.

I lick my lips. Whatever I may feel about this woman, there’s literally no one else to turn to for help right now.

I don’t have a choice.

I have to trust her.

My voice is husky when I finally speak. Giselle’s eyes fly wide as I say the words, “I need a pregnancy test.”

Chapter Ten

Timur

Blyad.

My mouth feels like shit. I try to swirl the bitter taste away, but there's no moisture to do it. I reach for my face. Something trails from my hand as I move it.

“*Pizda...*” I try to groan. The sound doesn't resemble the word I'd intended at all. I finally pry my eyes apart and the glare around me is blinding.

Where the fuck am I?

Where's Kayla?

I shoot upward. And immediately collapse onto my back again. Something is beeping rhythmically beside me, but the rhythm fluctuates as I try to sit up again. I can't. There are tubes attached to the back of my hand, and I'm propped against a pillow.

Hospital.

Fuck, I'm in a hospital.

My vision begins to clear. Things around me slowly come into focus. Beyond the foot of my bed, a door swings open. A white-uniformed woman steps into the room.

“Mr. Yakov!” she says. “You’re back with us.” She moves to the side of my bed and begins checking on a monitor nearby. “You shouldn’t be moving. You’ve had a really close call.”

Close call?

The last thing I remember was facing a hail of bullets and going down.

“Kayla!” I try to sit up again, but the nurse has put a hand on my shoulder and is easing me backward. I’m as weak as a kitten. Even her slight pressure is enough to push me down. “Kayla. They took her,” I croak out at last. My voice is foreign to my ears.

“Mr. Yakov, you need to lie back,” she says firmly. “I’m going to call the doctor to come in and check on you. You can address any questions to him.”

I slump back, breathless from the exertion, trying desperately to piece it all together. By the time a tall, silver-

haired man walks into the room, I've worked myself into a rage.

"Mr. Yakov," he says, "please, settle down." He's using the same maddeningly soothing tones that the nurse had used. "I'm Dr. Littleton. I've been attending to you since you arrived. You're a very lucky man."

I'm not feeling lucky right now. "When can I get out of here?" I ask.

Littleton shakes his head and chuckles, then stops when he realizes I'm not joking. "Mr. Yakov, you're not going anywhere right now. We spent days just stabilizing you. It's a miracle we were able to remove those slugs. Even more of a miracle that we were able to patch up the internal damage they did."

"So you are saying I'm fine?" I ask.

"Yes...well, you will be. With lots of rest. And most likely a few weeks of rehab."

Weeks?

I don't have fucking weeks. I have to get out of here. Right now. I fumble with the drip in my hand and try to swing my legs from the bed.

“Mr. Yakov, are you not hearing me?” The doctor pushes me back onto the pillows with as little effort as the nurse. “You need to rest. You’ve been out for days!”

“Days?” I feel horror descend. “How many days?”

“Nearly two weeks,” he clarifies. “You arrived unconscious and remained that way. We’ve monitored you since the surgery, and you’ve been in and out of consciousness. But these are the first lucid moments you’ve displayed.”

I’m barely hearing the details.

Nearly two weeks?

Bohze moy!

“No!” I shake my head. “That is too long. I need to get back out there. What can you give me to get me on my feet?”

“Nothing, son,” he says firmly, but he’s wrong. I’ve been through worse. I just need to get my shit together.

“Look,” he goes on, “you’ve survived a life-threatening injury. Give yourself some time, okay?” I nod, knowing it’s probably best to play his game. “Are you up for some visits?” he asks as he checks my charts.

I frown. Who would be visiting me? “Yes,” I say. It’s the only way I’ll find out.

“I had a note on your chart to make a call when you recovered consciousness.” He’s looking cagey. I suspect there will be questions that need answers. You don’t go into hospital with a gunshot wound – or several – without drawing attention from the authorities.

It takes less than an hour for the door to open again, and I’m looking into the face of a man I never thought I would see again.

“Yakov,” he says, and the clipped speech brings back memories I don’t want to face. Gregori Gusev was the “brigadier” who led the elite team I once belonged to. And if it wasn’t for him, I would never have left that team alive. You don’t get out of my world simply by handing in a letter of resignation. I have history with this man. I can trust him and that gives me some sense of relief.

“When are you getting me out of here?” I ask. I’m in no mood for small talk.

He splays his hands and grins. “I was wondering why you were still lying around.”

I try to roll to the side of my bed and feel the room spin.
It's no use.

"I need to get out," I say.

Gusev laughs. "Where have I heard that before?" he says.

"I'm serious, Gusev. *This* is serious."

"I know that, *bratok*," he says, patting my shoulder in a way that seems fatherly. I wish he wouldn't do that. There are barely five years between us, but Gregori Gusev always had his life mapped out. Whereas mine seemed to take tangents that sometimes seemed entirely out of control. As they do now. "Why do you think I am here?" he adds.

"Green," I say, and he nods. "You're connected?" He nods again.

"Things have changed since we worked together, *bratok*. I have gone...how would you say...legit." Gusev grins.

I stare in astonishment. "You left the Bratva?"

"In a manner of speaking." He lifts his shoulders. "We go where the money is. Right now, we are working with an agency that sees our value in this particular area."

“Particular area?” I frown at him. This is making my head ache.

“Infiltrating organizations like Koslov’s,” he says.
“Getting people like Green in place to extract information.”

Hope surges in me. “Did she go in?”

“She has been there all along,” says Gusev. I frown.

“She has? How?”

“Let’s just say she’s resourceful.” He remains enigmatic. “She’ll keep us covered until the time is right. That *mudak* has been dicking us around for months.”

“You can say that again.” The thought of fucking Vasilii brings my rage back up to a simmer.

“It’s worse than you think, Timur.” Gusev licks his lips.
“When Green went in, it was to get to the source of the trafficking. But the fucker seems determined to get out of the family business. Sees himself as some kind of mining magnate.”

“*Da*. It is why he kept me around,” I say. That had been my cover with Vasilii’s organization. His contact in the Congo had picked up on my team’s activities and followed closely until the day everything had gone to shit. My unceremonious

departure had been the hook he'd used to snare me. But it hadn't lasted long. Even with years of resentment under my belt for the brotherhood that had failed me. I could never be what he wanted me to be.

And then, he'd taken Nika to blackmail me into doing his dirty work for him.

“Well, the upshot is that all his gold mining efforts have been a complete waste of time. *Mudak* fell for just about every scam in the book without knowing. And while he's been doing it, he's been leading us away from the big fish.”

“The buyers,” I say drily.

“You got it,” Gusev affirms. “Normally, Vasiliy would be running weekly auctions out on that estate of his. But the bastard hasn't had one in the time Green's been in there. There's no way to pinpoint the trade routes or sniff out who the buyers are. There's been no movement there at all.”

I rub my face, hating the way my hand shakes as I do it. I hear what he's saying, though. It's a vicious circle. There is no way we can trace the girls unless they are being moved through the system. The fact that there's no movement that we're aware of isn't a reprieve. It simply means they're being

managed elsewhere. A network that lies completely beyond our scope.

And Kayla's headed straight to it.

Nika, too, if Vasiliy is sick enough.

If he doesn't simply kill her.

"You have to get me out of here," I repeat. Every minute I linger is a minute too long.

"Not possible, *bratok*," he says. "We had our medics take a look at your charts, and your doc is right. You were seriously fucked up when they brought you in here. If you try anything right now, you might cause some real damage."

"What about your box of tricks?" I ask. Gusev and his team had never been shy of resorting to battle drugs when necessary.

"What, so you can get on your feet and rip a gut? I'm not having that on me." He shakes his head. "There's nothing you can do now except rest. And leave this to us."

I slam a fist into the covers of the bed, but it's a futile gesture. I barely make a dent in the covers.

"Stay calm, Timur. You cannot do anything until we know his next move. Right now, we have no idea what that

might be. Give us time to find out.”

Calm?

Give him time?

He has no idea what he’s asking me to do. Or not do. But there’s no point in ranting. As much as it pains me to admit it, the man has a point. “Fine,” I mutter reluctantly.

“Get some sleep.” Gusev says as he gets up to leave the room. Once it’s time, you’ll know,” he says before the door closes behind him.

“I fucking hope so,” I tell him, though I doubt he hears me.

All I can do for now is trust him and Green to do their job and get me the fuck out of here when it’s time.

Chapter Eleven

Kayla

“Please, leave.” My voice is strident.

And for the first time since this whole ordeal began, Giselle does as I ask. Maybe she knows what’s good for her.

Taking one last look at the two damning pink lines on the pregnancy test, I sink onto the edge of Vasily’s ridiculous black satin bed. It shouldn’t have surprised me that Giselle just happened to have a stash of tests on hand. This place is full of Vasily’s sex puppets, after all. But I don’t want to think about that. I have other things on my mind. Like the fact that my pregnancy test came back positive.

What the hell do I do now?

Sinking down further, I sag until I’m lying on the coverlet, and then curl on my side. For a moment, the satin is cool against my cheek. It offers little comfort.

I’m so totally fucked.

I place both of my hands on my stomach and squeeze my eyes shut. My mind is spinning with a million different thoughts and worries, all centering on the little bundle growing inside of me.

What kind of life will my baby have?

I'm a prisoner in the lair of a monster. A human trafficker. At any moment, I could end up dead or sold to someone worse. Unless whoever's been sending the messages can save me before then. *Us*. It's not just me and Nika who need help now. I have to get out for my baby. The alternative is too horrible to think about. I give an involuntary shiver. In spite of everything I was warned about, Vasiliy hasn't actually harmed me. Aside from some occasional powerplay in bed, he's almost treated me like a girlfriend. That's probably freaked me out more than anything, because I live with the constant fear that at any minute, the penny will drop. I know it's all part of some twisted game to entertain himself. The man's a psychopath; I never had a doubt about it.

"Oh, baby..." I whisper into the silence, stroking my belly. All I can do is pray that he or she will survive all of this.

Will my little one ever meet his or her father?

I swallow hard, because that's a dilemma in itself.

Who's baby is it?

Timur's. It has to be.

But how can I be sure? What if it's Vasiliy's? What if I'm rescued from this place and he finds out that I'm having his child? He'll hunt me to the ends of the earth. I'll never be rid of him. He strikes me as that kind of man.

And I'll have given birth to the offspring of a monster.

It doesn't matter. I can already feel the love beginning to grow within me. A soft cocoon of tenderness that feels like it's spreading from my heart to the space where that little life is nestled.

I love you, baby...

If I have half the chance, this child will have everything I never had. A home. A family. Love and laughter. Total acceptance. My heart clenches as I imagine little toes I could kiss. A tiny hand in mine. A lifetime of firsts – first steps, first words, first day at school.

You're thinking too far ahead, Kayla.

It may never happen.

Tears spring to my eyes unbidden. I may not survive long enough for this baby to be born. Vasiliy might not even

let me have a pregnancy.

I fight down a sob at the thought of life being snatched away from my child before there's even a chance to draw breath.

I won't let it happen, dammit!

I have to hang onto the hope that whoever is leaving the messages will have a plan for us. Nika seems to have been finding them for a while, so it's possible they're already working on something. If I can just hang on until then, we might get out and survive.

And even if it's Vasiliy's baby, it'll be worth living through this nightmare if I get to raise my son or daughter. All the hurt, fear, and heartache will have been worth it.

I stifle a snuffle, dashing tears away angrily before curling in on myself.

I lay like that, lost in my confusion and misery until the door flies open. I sit up abruptly.

Vasiliy stands framed by the doorway, his expression unreadable.

“I believe you have news.”

Shit!

Behind him, I catch a glimpse of Giselle hovering, her hands fluttering anxiously. I throw her an accusing glare.

Traitor!

But then, what did I expect? She's never made any secret of the fact that she's Vasiliy's handmaiden. I've pleaded with her umpteen times for help, and none has been forthcoming. So much for the bonds of sisterhood. She's as bad as he is.

"I'm sorry, *cherie*. *C'est dommage* – it had to be done." She doesn't meet my eye as she says it.

Bitch.

I don't care what her reasoning was, she ratted me out. Just like before. Although there's no way I could have hidden it for long.

What am I going to do? Or do I even have a say in the matter?

"Leave us," Vasily snaps, not looking back at her. Giselle slips out of sight silently, leaving us staring at each other. "So?" He turns his attention back to me.

I lick my lips, which suddenly feel dry. It doesn't help much; my entire mouth is parched. I try to swallow and then

scramble for words.

“I’m pregnant,” is all I manage, which feels entirely ineffectual since of course he already knows this.

From his expression, he feels the same way. Contempt colors his expression. Asshole. What did he expect? I’m a healthy, fertile woman who’s been having a lot of sex over the past two months. It’s a matter of biology, dammit.

“So I hear,” he responds drily. I’d expected yelling. From the way that his jaw works, he’s considering it. “That fucking idiot,” he adds. I look at him silently wondering who he’s referring to. Is he talking about Giselle? Timur? Both of them? It seems ridiculous. How could anyone be blamed for an act of nature?

“What did you expect, Vasiliy?” I say what’s on my mind. “Women get pregnant when they have unprotected sex.”

They also get diseases, but I don’t mention that, since I have other things to worry about. Besides, considering the examinations I had to go through, I’d assume that health is a priority for this man.

“Yakov was supposed to see to it that you were using protection,” he mutters.

“That only works when you take it.” I set my jaw.

“Hardly possible when you’re either dodging bullets or tied to a fucking bed!” I can’t believe how stupid he is.

“Still, it was Giselle’s responsibility to—”

“Oh, so now it’s *her* fault?” The nerve of this guy. Though I probably shouldn’t provoke him.

“Regardless of where the fault lies, I am not interested in dealing with another of Yakov’s fucking brats,” he snaps. “One is enough. And I only tolerate her because she’s useful. For now. But this one will have to go. We will do something about it.”

My heart stutters and I wrap my arms around my belly protectively. He can’t force me to have an abortion! I won’t do it!

And exactly how do you plan to avoid it, Kayla?

I think of how futile any of my resistance has been since the start of this ordeal. They can make me do whatever they want. My strategy of kicking and screaming clearly didn’t do me any justice.

“Who says it’s Timur’s?” I lay down my trump card.

“What?”

“You’ve fucked me almost every day since I moved into this damned suite.” I sit up straighter.

His brows pull together. “You’ve saying it’s mine?”

“Why not?” I shrug. “Unless your swimmers aren’t strong enough to make the trip.”

Vasiliy’s expression darkens and I know I’ve struck a nerve. “My *swimmers* are plenty strong, *suka*,” he snaps. “But we will never know for sure until the child is born.”

“Precisely. So forcing me to get rid of it could mean killing your own baby. Perhaps a boy. An heir.” I pinch my lips together, praying he falls for the bait. The man’s arrogant enough to be the type who’d want to see his own bloodline continued. “The Koslov lineage, continued through you,” I add for good measure. “How would you feel if you killed your own son, Vasiliy?”

God, please.

Please let me keep this baby.

He’s silent as he stares at me. His eyes drop to my belly, then back to my face. I wish I could read what was going on behind that impassive exterior. Though one thing’s for certain.

If this child is his, it's going to be a knock-out. As much as I hate him, I can't deny that he's a good-looking bastard.

Too bad he's pure evil and deserves to rot in hell.

And Timur's even more gorgeous. Especially to me. No matter how good-looking Vasily is, he will never compare to him. I take a deep breath, surprised at how firmly I now believe that he's alive after all.

I'm going to have a beautiful baby.

I am!

“Vasily, I—”

He waves a hand, stopping my words short. “This is a matter I must think on.”

My teeth sink into my lip with such force that I taste blood.

Oh, God.

Please...

My heart is racing so hard I feel lightheaded. Unable to find words, I simply nod. The fate of my child rests in this man's hands. There's no sense in antagonizing him further. At least not right now.

As he turns abruptly and leaves the room, slamming the door behind him, I fight down the urge to run after him and beg for my baby's life. But I know it won't do any good. I doubt that all the pleas in the world will sway him.

Right now, all I can do now is pray.

Chapter Twelve

Kayla

The bags on the bed stop me in my tracks as I return from lunch with Nika.

Our little routine has been adjusted to accommodate a daily “burger” and, with it, a new message.

“Not long.”

“Stay strong.”

“We’re coming.”

Besides the baby in my belly, they’ve been all that’s keeping me going these past few days. As for Vasiliy, he barely spoke to me since I dropped the bombshell about being pregnant. Needless to say, I’m a nervous wreck.

“Are you taking a trip, Vasya?” I ask as I see him standing framed in one of the tall windows on the far side of the room.

“You are,” he says without turning around. I swallow hard.

“Me?” I say tentatively. “Are you taking me away with you?” I’m not liking where this conversation is going.

He turns around, and I’m looking into the face of the man I’d first met when I arrived here. The cold brutality in it makes my breath catch.

“You’re going away, Kayla.”

I clutch a hand up to my chest and stare at him, trying to make sense of what he’s saying. “Where am I going?” I ask.

I can’t go anywhere.

Not now!

He shrugs. “That is yet to be decided.”

“Decided?” I ask. “Who will decide?” Clearly, it won’t be me.

“Whoever buys you, Kayla.” He steps away from the window, but he’s still framed by a golden glow. I feel my knees buckle and reach out to a nearby chair.

“Buys me?” My voice has raised in pitch. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s not complicated, Kayla. You know what I do,” he says casually. I sink onto the chair before my legs give way.

“I’m putting you on auction.”

No.

I shake my head. “But I can’t... You can’t...” My lips are moving, but I can’t frame words. “Why?”

“You no longer amuse me,” he says, reaching for his phone and thumbing the screen. “It was entertaining to play the role of an ardent young lover, but I am tired of it now.” He looks over at me. “It’s time for you to go.”

“But—” My mind races furiously. I have to find some way to stay. We’re so close now. So close to getting away. It’s pointless, though. He’s looking down at his phone again and heading to the door. “But what about the baby?” I blurt.

“That will be the problem of whoever buys you.” He shrugs. “Don’t fret, *kukolka*. There are many men who enjoy fucking a woman who is with a child. They may let you keep it.”

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. I feel sick to my stomach. I fight down a wave of nausea and the urge to gag.

“You wouldn’t!” I hear horror in my own voice. I’m sure he does too, but it’s clear he doesn’t give a fuck. The man’s a monster. Not that I should be surprised at this point.

I've known that all along. But to send me away knowing that I'm pregnant?

Still, it's better than forcing me to get an abortion, right? At least there's still a chance. But then something else occurs to me. If I'm forced to leave here...

"And what about Nika?" I say quickly.

"She has outlived her usefulness," he says.

"No! I gasp. "You can't kill her! She's just a little girl." I suddenly feel rage build inside me. I want to sink my nails into his face and carve his eyes out.

"Why would I kill her?" His eyes remain cold. "She's worth good money."

I really do gag this time. The bitter taste of bile coats my tongue. I fight back yet another wave of rage, fear, and nausea. But it's clear that I'm helpless. He will do as he pleases and there is nothing I can do about it.

"Vasiliy..." I bite my lip, trying my best to keep the emotions at bay. "Please let me speak to her before I go."

He glances at me, examining me for a moment, as if weighing this up.

“Please,” I beg him. My voice is shaking now. I feel tears starting to flow. “We’ve become close. I just... I just want to say goodbye.”

God! I’m so afraid of what might happen to Timur if he comes charging in here. But I’m even more afraid of what might happen to Nika. Maybe there’s something I can say to prepare her for what might come. I think of the messages. Maybe whoever is sending them can save her before they send her away too. Even if it’s too late for me.

“Just let me see her one last time before I go. Please.” My tears are streaming down my cheeks as I look at him.

He exhales then jerks his head in assent. “Fine. It does not matter to me either way.” He turns away from me, leaving me limp with relief at this tiny victory. At least I can try to give Nika some small sense of comfort before I’m thrown to the wolves. “Giselle will see to you,” he says, barely acknowledging me as he walks out and shuts the door.

I stare, stupefied, as the woman fills the space he has left. I can’t comprehend this. Part of me knew it would happen, but I was hoping for a little more time.

You forced his hand with the baby, Kayla.

It's probably true. But how could I help it? It's not like I could undo my condition. Nor do I want to. With every passing day, I've fallen more in love with this little human I haven't even met yet. I stroke my stomach. It's become a habit now.

"Cherie..."

I'm still staring. Still trying to figure out what I'll do next. For Nika. For me. For my baby.

"Cherie." Giselle is standing beside me where I sit slumped. She runs a hand over my hair. The touch is gentle in a way that snares my attention. I look up at her and her eyes are deep and dark. "Kayla," she says, speaking beneath her breath. Giselle never calls me Kayla. And the French accent is gone. She glances around us quickly. "Kayla... You have to stay strong. We're coming."

The air seizes in my lungs. My mouth suddenly drops open.

It's her.

She's here to help us!

Chapter Thirteen

Timur

Huge, dark eyes stare up at me, as I watch the rifle being raised.

The child before me shrinks back in terror as Leskov's finger bears down on the trigger. Again, I'm washed by a flood of frustration and helplessness as I watch events unfold that have played over in my mind a thousand time since that day.

A thousand scenes in which I could do nothing but watch.

This time it's different. This time, I feel my thighs flex and my muscles bunch as I launch myself with a roar toward the fucker who plans to snuff out an innocent life. This time, I feel the lurch as my body crashes into him. It's his eyes that fly wide this time. His face that contorts in fear and horror as I drive a fist into his jaw. His head whips sideways and he goes down.

I don't let up. I beat him mercilessly, my fists flying in the air and landing with sickening thuds against his face and body. The only sound is the crunch of bone and the wet smacking of flesh. He puts up a fight, but I'm stronger and more determined.

I beat him for the life he took, for the evil inside him, for stealing so many years from me. My rage propels me forward, driving me as if by an outside force to punish this man for what he has done.

He has no chance.

I crush him like an insect.

My fists keep pounding until his body is limp beneath me and his face is nothing but a bloody mess – unrecognizable as human anymore. Finally satisfied with my work, I slowly stand up, taking deep breaths to steady myself.

Fucker deserved his fate.

As I look around at the aftermath of my actions, some semblance of calmness washes across me – despite all that has happened here today there is still something good left in this world; something that allows me to stand up against evil instead of being defeated by it. As I look down at the

unmoving shell of the man I've beaten into a pulp, his body evaporates into a swirl of dark mist, as if he'd never been there.

I turn to the child, who's been silent and motionless through all of this. His eyes are wide with shock, but also with a glimmer of hope.

"You're okay, *malchik*," I tell him, my voice low and soft. He doesn't move at first, then his face slowly relaxes as he realizes that it's over, that he is safe now. A small smile begins to form on his lips and my heart swells at the sight of it.

"Go," I urge him. "You're free."

Without another word he turns away and runs, heading toward a group of people standing not too far away – his family – all alive and waiting for him to come back to them. He runs faster as they see him coming, their own faces lighting up.

As I watch the reunion unfold before me, a feeling of completion washes over me. This is how it should have ended. With hope, not with a village of corpses. Not innocent blood beneath the booted feet of Bratva mercenaries who couldn't give a fuck about the lives they snuffed out.

When the scene fades away, I heave out a breath and feel my eyes flickering open. I'm staring up at a white ceiling now. The ever-present smell of disinfectant replaces the stench of smoke and fear. I turn my head to take in the hospital room.

Dreaming, dickhead.

You were dreaming.

I know that, of course. The dream is so familiar that it's now become a part of my daily world. But this time, it was different. This time, I took control. Prevented a life from being taken. Took my own life back.

Perhaps I deserve redemption.

Even after everything I've done.

I struggle to sit up, grimacing at the searing pain that tears through my chest. I'm still heavily bandaged, but no longer attached to the banks of machines nearby. There's that.

And there's the fact that I don't feel gutted by the constant sense of guilt. They took my old life from me. My future. My family. But all of that is going to change now. My old self may be dead and buried – they ended that person when they shot me full of holes – but I'm back now, and I'm stronger than before. Nobody will ever take what's mine again.

Yanking out the needle that holds the drip in the vein in my hand, I fling the tube away and swing my legs from the bed. The door swings open just as I land unsteadily on my feet.

“Mr. Yakov!” an alarmed-looking nurse squawks at me.

“Get me a phone,” I snap back with as much force as I can. It’s hard to look menacing while dressed in a ridiculous hospital gown, but it seems to do the trick because she backs out of the room rapidly.

It’s not much of a victory; when she returns a minute later, she’s tailed by Dr. Littleton. I straighten gingerly from where I’d been rooting through the small chest of drawers beside my hospital bed.

Blyad!

“What do you think you’re doing?” he asks.

“Looking for my phone.” I glare back at him. “It is time to get moving. I have wasted too much time sleeping.”

“I’d hardly say you were sleeping, Mr. Yakov,” he replies, moving toward me and putting a hand on my shoulder to push me back to the bed. His eyes widen when they meet resistance. Some of my strength is returning; he can’t move

me. “You were clinically dead when you arrived. Your heart had stopped beating. We thought we’d lost you. After the surgery, the coma you slipped into was nearly an improvement, considering the alternative.”

“Well, my heart is beating now,” I mutter, pushing his hand away. “I need to get moving.”

“You are not going anywhere!” Littleton snaps, his eyes growing steely. When he puts his hand against my shoulder this time, there’s a lot more force behind it. I sit down abruptly as my knees sag.

Well, fuck.

Still weak like like shit.

“I need my phone,” I try instead. “I have to make a call.”

“I’m the one making the call right now, and as your doctor, my call is that you get back in bed!”

“Only if you give me my phone.” Since I’m still nowhere near my full strength, it seems negotiation is my only option. Lucky for him.

The doctor eyes me for a moment, then heaves a breath. “Bring Mr. Yakov his belongings, nurse,” he says over his

shoulder. The woman in the doorway bustles away. He turns back to me. “Exactly what are you planning to get up to, Mr. Yakov?”

“That is none of your business.” I look past him as the nurse returns with a small bundle of items.

“Everything about you is my business while you’re in my care,” the doctor disagrees.

“That won’t be for long.” I reach for the bundle that the nurse is extending. It’s the clothing I was wearing when I was brought in. It’s been cleaned but the shredded fabric tells its own story. Among the garments, I find my watch and my cell phone. I power it on; someone must have had the foresight to keep the thing charged, thank fuck. The doctor doesn’t stop me, though he frowns when I fumble through the contact list.

“I would like some privacy,” I tell him. We lock eyes. “You have met my associate, yes?” It’s not a question. If the look I’m giving him isn’t enough, I’m pretty sure Gusev will scare the shit out of him.

“You’re still set on leaving despite my advice to the contrary?” Littleton’s nostrils flare as he exhales. I shrug. “It’s your funeral,” he mutters. Shaking his head, he turns away sharply. His shoulders are tense as he makes his way to the

door. He turns one last time to look at me. “I can’t stop you from being a fool right now,” he says. “Just try not to die. I might not be around to bring you back next time.”

I don’t watch him leave. I’m too busy waiting for my call to connect.

“I am ready,” I say when I hear the voice on the other end.

“Good. Just in time for the party.” Gusev’s tone is dry.

“Party? Something happened?”

“There’s been movement. Koslov is preparing for something.”

I suddenly feel my blood pump harder. Finally. It’s time to make that piece of shit pay for everything he’s done.

“Tell me you have plans in place.” I tell Gusev as I’m peeling away the dressings around my chest. As the white fabric unravels, I see a map of angry red scars that mar my skin. The flesh has mostly knitted, though, aside from one or two deeper wounds.

That will do.

“I thought you would never ask, *bratok*.” He pauses. “Things are moving fast.”

“Good.” I breathe out. The sense of doing nothing will kill me faster than a bullet right now. “It’s time to even some scores.”

Chapter Fourteen

Kayla

We're walking down one of the wide hallways, the gilt-framed paintings passing in a blur as Giselle guides me briskly, her hand on my elbow. I'm too exhausted to do anything other than comply.

It's her.

It's been Giselle all along.

The one who's been sending the secret messages.

"Giselle," I whisper breathlessly. "Can you tell me what's going on?"

She shakes her head yet again. Her response had been the same in Vasiliy's room, when it had dawned on me and I'd silently begged her to tell me more. "Can we get out of here? Me and Nika?" I'd asked. She'd set a fingertip on my lip and given a tiny shake of her head. A meaningful look had me glancing around the room.

“They’re listening,” she’d mouthed. And that had been the last she’d said of it, leaving me wondering if the headshake was to quieten me, or to tell me they weren’t getting us out.

Whoever they are, they have to have a plan. Why else would they have been sending us all those messages? Unless of course, it’s just another of Vasiliy’s sick games. I wouldn’t put it past him.

Don’t think like that.

I have to cling to this hope. All I can do is trust Giselle and whoever she’s working with.

Now she’s practically frogmarching me to Nika’s room.

“There isn’t much time, *cherie*.” The accent is back again. “*L’enfant*... The child. You must see her now, before...”

I know what she means. Before it’s *too late*. She doesn’t have to say it.

My head is filled with a million questions. Who is she really? What is she doing here? Is she here to save us? If so, when? Too bad I can’t ask her any of this. If Vasiliy finds out, we’re both dead.

We're outside Nika's room, and Giselle stops. She looks at me with a grave expression on her face. "You must be brave," she says once more. "Do you understand?"

I nod, because of course, I understand. I might be more exhausted than I've ever been, but I'm not stupid.

She turns away and silently opens the door. Her lithe figure disappears inside as I take a deep breath and follow her to the room.

I step inside and take a deep breath, my heart pounding as I try to come up with the right thing to say. What can I possibly tell a child that will help right now? I'm about to abandon her – it may not be my fault, but that won't make any difference to her. She's about to lose the only person that gives her some sense of safety.

Hope and despair war within me. I fight them down and take a look around me.

The room is spacious with soft pastel colors and toys scattered across the floor. At least that bastard Vasily kept Nika somewhat comfortable.

She's playing with a little group of dolls on the far side of the room, but when she notices us, she leaps to her feet and

bounds toward us. She flings her arms around my waist.

“Kayla!” Her face is bright. “Have you come to play?” She has me by the hand and is leading me back to her dolls.

I shake my head, trying not to tear up.

I plaster a smile on my face. “I want to speak to you.” As she sits down, I sink onto my haunches beside her.

“What do you want to speak about? Dolls?” She holds up a Barbie. “I called this one Kayla.”

For a second, I can’t find my voice to respond to her. “That’s beautiful, sweetheart,” I eventually manage. She’s gazing at me expectantly. “But I need to speak to you about something else.” I stop stalling and get to the point. “I have to go away.”

“Away?” Her brow furrows. “With Miss Giselle?” She glances over my shoulder to where I assume Giselle must be standing.

I shake my head. “With, um... Vasily. Giselle will be staying here with you.” I look back at the woman. She gives a barely perceptible nod, and the relief that floods me is almost overwhelming. I might be marching to my death, but at least Nika won’t be alone.

“When are you coming back?” Nika asks.

I swallow hard. I’m not coming back. Not if Giselle’s people don’t get to me in time. But there’s no way I can tell her that.

“I’m not sure, sweetheart. It may be a while.” My voice cracks and I clear my throat. I duck my head and reach for a doll to disguise the fact that tears are welling. I blink them away quickly.

“Tomorrow?” She tilts her head.

I shrug. “I don’t think so. It will probably be longer.”

“Not too long, I hope.” Her voice brightens. “Before my birthday? I’m going to be seven, you know. Shall we plan a party?”

God help me.

This is much harder than I expected.

“I’ll do my best, sweetie,” I choke out. What else am I supposed to say? All I can hope is that she’s too young to feel the weight of my absence when it becomes clear that I’m gone for good. Or better yet, that she’s been saved from this hellhole and is safely with her father by then.

Timur...

I exhale abruptly to clear my head. There's no point in going down that road again.

"Where are you going?" Her question is distracted, and that eases my anxiety a little. She walks her doll toward the one I'm holding.

"Just for a little trip," I tell her.

"Can you get me another doll?"

"I'll do my best, sweetheart," I say again. I feel like the worst person in the world as I continue to lie to her. But somehow, it seems better this way. She's a child. To her, I'm just a stranger who kept her company for a while. At least, that's what I tell myself.

We sit in silence for several moments, my wrapped up in my thoughts, and Nika engaging her dolls in some sort of interaction.

Finally, she speaks again. "Promise me you won't forget about me," she says quietly. All talk of dolls has suddenly dissipated.

Does she know?

She can't possibly know.

My heart twists in my chest and I fight back tears. “Of course, I won’t,” I whisper hoarsely. “How could I?”

She stares at me with those beautiful eyes of hers – Timur’s eyes – and I feel the weight of my words settle onto me like a blanket. We stay like that for what feels like an eternity, her playing with her dolls, and me simply watching. Eventually, I hear Giselle clear her throat behind me. Reluctantly, I stand.

“I’ll be off now, Nika.” I pinch out a smile.

Nika stands, and reaches out to hug me tightly. “Goodbye,” she whispers.

I choke back a sob as I hold her, trying to memorize every single detail of this moment so that no matter where I go or what happens, at least I can keep it alive in my memory. I have a feeling I’ll be needing it to get me through whatever it is I’m about to face.

Finally, I pull back. Fear and sadness are clogging my throat as reality hits me once more: this is goodbye. Probably for good — if I’m not saved by Giselle’s people there will be no coming back.

There is nothing else left to do or say now besides taking one last look at her before gathering the strength to turn away and walk out of the room. The memory of her innocent form playing with her dolls as I leave, will be forever engrained in my brain.

Giselle is waiting as I shut the door behind me. I sag back against it, trying to stop my legs from giving way.

“You good?” she asks quietly. I stare at her and find myself nodding. At least her presence is giving me some sense of comfort. I tell myself that everything is going to work out. That I’m not going to be taken from here, put onto an auction block and end up in the hands of some creature who buys pregnant women.

Needless to say, it doesn’t work. It never does. My nerves are strung as taut as violin strings. Giselle is still playing it safe by not saying anything that might draw attention, but God, I so desperately need to know what to expect next. I need some sort of reassurance. Not for myself, but for Nika, and the precious life growing inside me.

“Please...” I whisper. My voice is low and urgent.
“Please take care of her.” She nods and that soothes me a little.
“Help me get out,” I add. She doesn’t say yes. She doesn’t say

anything. Just puts her hand on my shoulder and squeezes. Her eyes soften.

I try to take comfort from that. Try to convince myself that she's telling me they have things under control. What else can I do?

“Come, *cherie*,” she says firmly, all business now. The Giselle I'd come to know and despise. “We need to get you ready.”

A cold shiver runs through me once more.

Ready for what?

Chapter Fifteen

Kayla

Vasiliy reaches for my hand and helps me from the limo. He runs his eyes over me as I set the sole of my teetering shoe onto the red carpet.

“You look ravishing, *kukolka*,” he says warmly. Once again, the attentive lover has emerged. I’m facing a man who is gazing at me with something akin to adoration.

If I wasn’t so terrified and exhausted, I’d slap his face. But at this point, all the fight I used to have in me has left me. And even if there’s some of it left, I might as well save it for the pervert who’s about to buy me like a piece of meat.

I’m dressed in skin-tight red satin that trails to the toes of my glittering sequined sandals. There’s a swathe cut from the fabric that sweeps in an S from one thigh, across my groin, and over my breasts. While I may be covered, anything of importance – my breasts, my pussy – are all on display. True to form, Vasiliy runs his fingertips over my nipples as I straighten my shoulders and look up at the vessel before us.

It's an ocean-going yacht that's so vast it could be a cruise liner. The sleek blue lines of it are embellished with silver-framed portholes. Flashes of light are flickering through the glass. A carpeted gangplank has been set onto the dock. I almost resist, but Vasiliy has my hand linked through his elbow. When he feels me pause, his fingers tighten painfully on mine.

He keeps shooting curious glances at me. I do my best to keep a faintly bemused expression on my face, turning unfocused eyes up at him occasionally. It would be better if he thought I was doped. It doesn't stop him from scooping a flute of champagne from a passing waiter as we enter a huge room. It's almost impossible to believe we're on a yacht. The space is so vast. It's filled with a low hum of conversation, mainly men, most of whom are clustered in groups. Women move among them, collared, cuffed. Like me, they're scantily clad and silent. At the center of the room is a raised platform. I have no doubts about what that is for.

It's the auction block.

Giselle has prepared me for what may come if they don't get to me in time. But I cling grimly to the hope that it won't come to that.

“Vasya!” a voice booms through the chatter. I sneak a sidelong glance and see a short, squat man pushing through the crowd to reach my captor. “It’s been far too long, my friend,” he’s clapped a hand on Vasiliy’s shoulder, but he’s eyeing me with open hunger. I take a step behind Vasiliy without thinking. Vasiliy reaches for my hand and tugs me up to his side, allowing the other man to get a good, long look. I cringe.

“Claude,” he responds smoothly. “I am so pleased you could join us.” His smile is pure charm. “Kayla, this is Claude. He’s a filmmaker. Claude makes... *special* films for a very special audience.” Claude is nodding, not taking his eyes off of me. He’s staring at my throat.

“Pleased to meet you,” I murmur, not sure if I’m supposed to respond to the introduction.

“Ah, what a pretty pet, Vasya,” Claude says to Vasiliy, ignoring my greeting. “Your own?”

“Not anymore,” he says dismissively. “She’s looking for her new daddy.” Fuck, he’s such a sick bastard.

“You’ll be putting her up on the block tonight?” Claude is looking at me in a way that makes me feel like I’m being appraised.

“For the right price, of course,” Vasiliy says casually.
“She’s quite remarkable.”

“What kind of price would you be thinking of?” Claude runs a hand down my arm, and I flinch.

Jesus, I’m going to throw up.

“Let’s see what the market dictates,” Vasiliy smiles and takes a sip from his glass, his eyes elsewhere, as if he’s lost interest in the other man. It only seems to prompt more enthusiasm. “She comes as a two-for-one deal,” he murmurs. “A special package.”

The other man’s eyes brighten and I cringe away from him. When he licks his lips, he looks like an evil little reptile.

“A special package.” His eyes dip to my stomach and then he glances back to the man who has me pinned at his side. There’s no doubt in my mind that Claude heard the unspoken message loud and clear.

Vasiliy nods. “You understand?”

The little toad nods vigorously. “Yes, yes! Perhaps we could strike a deal?” Claude suggests. I clench my fists so tightly my nails cut into my palms. He’s odious.

“Let’s talk closer to the time, shall we?” says Vasiliy, reaching for my hand and guiding me into the crowd. As we move out of earshot, he leans down slightly. “Well done, Kayla, you were superb.”

I don’t know what he’s talking about. I didn’t do anything aside from standing there and wishing they would both burst into flames.

For the next few minutes, we continue the process, meeting, talking, being appraised. I’m being marketed and prepped, and there’s not a thing I can do about it. By the time the lights dim and a spotlight illuminates the stage, my knees are shaking.

Where the fuck are you, Giselle?

Although part of me can’t believe she’s going to help me, the survivor within is still clinging to the hope that, at any minute, she’ll arrive with reinforcements and I’ll be saved. But as time has passed, I’ve noticed the change in the motion beneath us. The ship has set sail, and we’re at sea.

They won’t find us!

Vasiliy is now leading me up to the center stage. My eyes continue to dart around as my desperation grows. He

reaches for a microphone and begins addressing the gathering of men.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” he speaks to the crowd. “I would like to thank you for joining me here tonight. As always, we have gathered an excellent selection of tantalizing wares for your private pleasure.” There’s a smattering of laughter. “But to begin the proceedings, and as a small token of my appreciation, I would like to submit to you a piece from my own private collection.” I’m being pushed forward into the light. I spin my head to look at him, but he’s looking past me into the audience. “I would like to remind you that there are no reserves on our items.

“Vasya! Please!” My voice breaks. It’s useless, of course. He doesn’t even hear me.

The crowd is pressing closer, and then a man who’d been standing beside Vasiliy steps up behind me. He reaches for the zipper that runs down the length of my dress and strips it down. The satin peels away from me, and I’m left in the spotlight in just my glittering heels. There is an appreciative murmur.

Someone calls out. “Ten thousand!”

Vasiliy chuckles. “Ah, my friend, you can do better than that.”

Within minutes, bids are rolling in. I spin from side to side to see where each is coming from. There’s no point in appealing to the monster who brought me here.

Giselle!

Where are you, dammit?

“Twenty thousand!”

“Thirty!”

It continues. My mind boggles as a string of numbers is bandied about. I’m certain much of it has to do with the champagne that continues to circle around the group.

Someone bids a hundred thousand and my head spins. I’ve never even seen that much money.

“As a sweetener, I would like to point out that I have personally sampled this pretty doll. She is most enthusiastic.” Vasiliy’s words are met with rowdy laughter. Someone offers one-hundred-and-fifty. “And,” he continues, “for those who enjoy such things, the girl is pregnant.”

The laughter turns into something uglier. I feel myself shrink back, but Vasiliy puts his fingertip beneath my chin and

lifts my head up. I stare with horror into eyes that glitter with evil. Even knowing that I might be carrying his child, this monster is doing this. Driven by a sudden surge of rage, I spit in his face, then wait for the slap in response.

But he merely laughs.

“As you can see, the bitch has fire.” He looks around at the group. Someone bids a quarter of a million dollars. If I wasn’t so filled with dread right now, I’d be astonished at the amount of money being exchanged for me.

There’s more jostling. More bidding. I squeeze my eyes closed to shut it all out.

“One million!” a voice echoes through the room, and then there’s silence.

Vasiliy laughs out loud. “Claude! You sly devil! We were nowhere near that figure.”

“I want her!” Claude replies. There’s a ripple of laughter. The vile little man is elbowing up to the edge of the stage. He licks his lips as he reaches for me, and I feel his hot hands running over my skin.

“Stop it! Stop it!” I scream as I’m dragged from the stage. But nobody is listening. Nobody who cares.

Giselle!

Timur...

Oh, God.

And then a gunshot cuts through the voices. And then another. And several more.

For a split second, everything goes silent around us. It's the kind of silence that sets in just before all hell breaks loose. And it does. People suddenly start screaming and the crowd descends into utter chaos. There's a mad crash of bodies; men in tuxedos, half-naked women, and I'm caught in the frenzy of it. I don't have time to find my bearings. Claude is surrounded by men in suits who seem to appear from nowhere. He's shouting high-pitched orders, and then he's swept away. And I'm taken along with him.

"The boat, sir!" someone shouts from behind me. The chaos around us becomes almost maddening. I hear Claude shouting, "Get the girl! Get the fucking girl!" and then I'm lifted from my feet. Rough hands are on my bare body as I'm hefted up and carried away. The stench of fuel wafts up to me as we reach the edge of the yacht.

There's help here now.

Giselle!

Safety is within reach.

But they're taking me away!

"No!" I scream. "I'm here!"

And then someone throws a heavy blanket over my head, and my screams are muffled.

It's too late.

Chapter Sixteen

Timur

“It’s showtime, *bratok*,” Gusev’s voice pulls me from the fitful slumber I’d slipped into while waiting; I’m still weak like a fucking kitten, dammit. I awaken groggy but I’m alert in seconds as I realize he’s standing beside my bed. He’s holding a vial in one hand, drawing down into a syringe as I watch him. “Got you some of the good stuff,” he says as he flicks the tip of the needle and reaches for my arm.

Battle drugs.

I’ve done this before. I wait for the heat and the rush of adrenalin as the cocktail of speed and opioids surge through my system. I suck in a sharp breath as the blood sings in my veins. And then I’m sitting. I’d felt my strength gather in the days since I’d seen him, but I’d almost been convinced I would never make it.

“What’s the plan?” I ask as I swing my legs off the side of the bed.

“That’s what I was about to ask you,” he says, watching as I tentatively put weight on my feet. I feel a slight shudder in my thighs, but then I’m standing steady. *Fuck, this shit is good.* “Your clothes are at the end of the bed. Get kitted up and meet me outside in five.”

When I reach him in front of my door, he’s got his hand on Littleton’s shoulder. The doctor looks up at me. His eyes widen in surprise.

“Mr. Yakov...!” he starts to say and then seems to think better of it.

“All good here, yes?” says Gusev, and the doctor nods.

“You make sure the paperwork gets filed,” the doctor insists. “I don’t want any fallout from this if things go wrong.”

“No problem, Doctor. We have you covered,” Gusev reassures him.

Then we’re striding through the hallways. I feel the heat building in my thighs as the muscles stretch and flex there. I’ve been on my back for far too long.

“What’s the story?” I ask as we slide into a white SUV idling in the emergency entrance. “I thought you had this thing under control.”

“I did. Then it got out of our hands,” he says grimly.

Blyad.

I don't like the sound of that.

“What happened?”

“Vasiliy's set up an auction. They shifted up the timeline.”

“How soon?” I ask, knowing what's coming.

“Now.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I blurt.

“And it gets worse. We don't know where they're holding it.”

“Jesus!” My head is spinning, and it's not from the drugs.

“Your girl is with them, Timur. Kayla,” he says. I rub my face. Pumped full of medication, my mind needs time to find a clear path.

“Nika?”

“She's fine. Green has her. But they're back at the estate with a pack of his security detail.”

“Not fine, then.”

“It’ll hold,” he says firmly. “Those girls are our priority.” He fixes me with a stare. “You know the man. You’ve worked in his circles. Where would he take them? Where would a man like Vasiliy Koslov auction off a bunch of girls into the sex trade?”

I’m still fighting the fog, but it’s coming to me faster than I’d imagined.

“The yacht.”

“Yacht?”

“He has her tethered at the marina. It’s big enough for a crowd that size. A place to land a chopper if he needs to. That’s how he will move them. Out on the ocean, sold, and then they’ll vanish. Either helicopter or high-speed motorboat.” As I say the words, I know that’s exactly how he would play it. It’s been brutal working with that motherfucker, but it’s taught me how he thinks. “We’re going to need a team,” I continue. “Something special. Koslov’s men do not fuck around when it comes to security. And the sort of buyers he’ll invite will have the same priorities.”

As I’ve been talking, Gusev has tapped our driver on the shoulder. I sense a change in direction. He’s dialing a number

and rattling instructions down the line. By the time we reach the marina, there's a chopper hovering nearby.

I clamber from the vehicle, still testing the strength of my legs. Someone steps up from nearby, and I'm being strapped into body armor. I reach for an assault rifle that Gusev has hauled from the trunk of another SUV.

"You got more of that jungle juice, Gusev?" I ask him, worried I might need more meds soon. I heft the weapon, feeling the familiarity of its weight in my hands.

"Take it easy, *bratok*. We don't want your head to explode." But he pats the top of his vest and winks, reassuring me that he has more vials. "Just in case...but don't go fading on me."

"They've been spotted, boss. Out to the west," another man shouts over the whirr of the rotors as we duck into the waiting bird. I've already reached for the harness that will allow me to descend once we reach the vessel. I doubt there will be time to land and disembark. We have to get in and move fast.

As we take to the air, I'm aware of another helicopter pulling up behind us. Gusev's called in the cavalry alright. But we have no real idea of what we will face when we arrive. By

the time the lights flicker in the darkness, I'm feeling a tingle of anticipation I remember from a long time ago. But more than that. There's a wave of dread.

What if it's too late?

I can't allow myself to think that way.

We're on top of them, and there's a shout from below as someone realizes something is going on. I drop from the skid beneath the helicopter. Then I feel the rope singing through the lightweight glove protecting my palm as I streak down toward the deck. I'm aware of others doing the same. Gusev is right behind me, and then shots are ringing out. And the screams begin.

Vasiliy may have thrown us on the back foot by planning this event on the spur of the moment, but it has worked in our favor. They're poorly prepared. A gathering like this would normally host some of the wealthiest sickos in the world. Normally, they'd have arranged security weeks in advance. Perhaps Vasiliy thought that the remoteness would protect them. Or the fact that they're on the move. It doesn't matter now. We're in, and I'm slamming through bodies.

I sweep the crowd, watching fat cats scatter. Gusev's team has picked out the guys most likely to cause trouble.

Heavily armed men are being grabbed and thrown to the ground. A balding man in a tuxedo scuttles to the door with a screaming girl in tow. I reach for his collar and jerk him back to face me. He stares up in horror, straight down the barrel of my rifle.

“Where is she?” I grind out. I know it’s not enough, but I’m in no mood for small talk. “Where the fuck is she?”

“I don’t know who you’re talking about!” he whimpers, shrinking back against the door behind him.

“The girl! Vasiliy’s girl!”

“The curvy brunette?” he gasps out just as I’m tempted to hit him in the face with the butt of my rifle.

For a moment I feel a sense of relief.

Thank fuck.

She’s here among them.

“Tell me where or I will blow your brains out,” I snarl with growing impatience. I must find Kayla before they take her. Every fucking second counts.

“She... she was the first off the lot,” his voice quavers. Now I really want to hit him. “They sold her before anyone else. She’s gone.”

I feel my blood boil as a wave of anger surges through me. I take a small step back and try to control my breathing.

Blyad!

Kayla!

Can she really be gone? I stand straight and desperately look around for any signs of hope. Around us, the sound of high-speed motors fills the air as powerboats shoot off into the darkness. Into oblivion.

My stomach clenches. I know what that means. I'm too late. She's on one of them.

She's gone.

For good.

And I'm never going to find her.

Chapter Seventeen

Timur

I stare into the wide, horrified eyes of the bald bastard in front of me.

I have to forcibly restrain myself from smashing his face in. His eyes dart around in a panic. No doubt looking for his security detail. Too fucking bad for him that Gusev has them on the ground and out of action.

“Who. Took. Her.” I punctuate the words slowly and clearly. I don’t want it on my conscience if I kill the fucker because he didn’t hear what I was saying.

“I- I-” he stutters. I’m not sure if it’s because I’ve twisted my fist into his collar tightly enough to choke him or if he just doesn’t want to tell me. I’m not waiting to find out.

“Who took her?” I roar in his face and then sideswipe him with the barrel of my rifle. He screams and sags against me. I sense that he may have just soiled his fancy tuxedo. I would feel sorry for the spineless bastard if I didn’t know why

he was here in the first place. Buying himself a sex slave. A woman snatched from her world to serve him and his depravity. It's a fact that rankles when I dwell on it. I did almost the same to Kayla barely a month ago.

But I'm making up for that now. We're saving these women. And I'm going to find her if it's the last thing I do. I flip the rifle up and jam the business end between his eyes.

Yep, that tux is ruined.

"Claude!" he bleats. "Claude Doubel!"

For some reason, the name pings my radar. I rack my memory banks, pulling at fragments of information I've stored over the years.

Motherfucker.

Claude Doubel runs a specialty porn production house. *Snuff movies*. They're going to kill her! My blood pressure shoots straight through the roof.

"Where?" I bellow into his face. I'm not wasting time with more threatening actions now. My finger is on the trigger, and the wrong answer is going to get his head blown off.

"I don't know where! I swear it! The last I saw, they were heading toward the front deck," he shrieks. He's

sniveling like a kid. “I don’t know anything else. Please!
Please don’t kill me!”

I stare into his face, and for a second, I have to resist the urge to pull the trigger. But it would be a complete waste of time and ammunition. I fling him away from me, spin on my heel, and sprint toward the door that leads out.

On my path, I plow through the chaos. Some of the “guests” are putting up a fight. It’s futile. Gusev’s men have as little tolerance for their kind as I do. Armed with steely determination and an assault rifle, I make short work of it. Until I bound through the doorway and down the passage along the side of the yacht and run headlong into the Russian equivalent of a brick wall.

Yegor Baranov’s cold eyes meet mine for a fraction of a second, and there’s a flash of recognition before he launches into me.

Fuck.

I barely have time to brace myself before he hits my chest like a tank. The wind is knocked out of me in a rush. He has his arms locked around my torso, and I’m flat on my back, no time to raise my weapon.

Vasiliy's second-in-command was raised on the streets. And he liked it there. Brute force is wired into his DNA. Without hesitation, he rears back and aims his forehead straight at my face. It's a headbutt that might have left me reeling if I hadn't twisted away at the last second. Yegor's head cracks into the deck, and I know he's seeing stars.

It's just the advantage I need to pry myself from his loosening grasp. But I'm not on top of my game yet. I'm feeling stitches tearing open. Gusev's battle drugs are good but not a miracle cure. I've been flat on my back for far too long.

I haul myself to my knees, reaching for the assault rifle. But even half-stunned, Yegor has the sense to fling out a hand and knock it out of reach. I manage to get to my feet before he's found his own, and I suck in air and spin to face him. He's slid a hand behind his back, and when it reappears, it glitters. A vicious blade now weaves in front of him as he advances on me with murder in his eyes.

"Give it up, Timur," he sneers. "It's too late. She's gone."

"*Poshel na khuy,*" I know he's just trying to bait me to distract me. I do a rapid sweep of the area around us and pivot

to reach for a broom propped against the wall. Yegor chuckles darkly as I swing it out at him.

“Planning to make a clean sweep, Yakov?” he says, feinting at me with the blade.

“Just taking out the trash, Baranov,” I reply. I flip the broom handle up and snap it over my knee. He seizes the gap and charges, slashing at me with the blade. I parry with the broom handle and feel the sharp edge of his knife thunk into the thick wood.

Yegor twists his grip on the haft to yank it free and spins back to face me again. We face off for a second. I could take out the motherfucker without a problem, under normal circumstances. But these are no normal circumstances. I’m feeling myself flagging. And the man fights dirty. With a blade in his hand.

I crouch slightly, waiting for him to give a sign of his next move. And there it is. A flicker of his eyelid as he lunges again.

I sidestep him and smack him sharply across the back of the neck with the wooden bar. To his credit, he barely misses a beat, but I know it had to hurt. He’s snarling when he lunges again. I get in a vicious jab to his ribs, but not before I feel a

searing pain across my bicep when he catches me with the blade. But the rib shot took the air out of his lungs, and I'm about to follow it with a blow to the jaw when I hear a scream.

I know that voice!

I swivel in the direction of the sound. There's another scream, followed by a muffled curse.

It's her!

She's on board!

Seeing my attention diverted, Yegor launches himself at me, blade first. At the last second, I raise the broken handle to divert a thrust that was intended to take my throat out. For agonizing moments, we grapple frantically, Yegor straining to slash the blade at my neck. There's yet another scream, and it galvanizes me.

I have to get to her!

But I won't do it while there's still breath left in my opponent. Using every ounce of my strength, I fling the man from me. Thrusting myself to my feet, I swing to face him, just in time to ward off a ferocious kick to my hip. I grab his ankle and flip him onto the floor. And then I'm on him.

Grasping the broken broom handle in both hands, I wedge it firmly under his chin and wrench back. Yegor grunts as the wood crushes into his windpipe, but he fights back like a tiger. White-hot pain flares across my ribs as he flails back at me with his blade. But I don't release my grip. I can hear him gasping hoarsely, trying to reach for air.

I twist my fists on the wooden handle and hear a sickening crunch as his windpipe shatters. He's gurgling through blood, but he's still fighting me. Weakening, though. I'm slowly suffocating him, and his blows are missing their mark. I grit my teeth and hold on. The moment seems to drag on for eternity. Every second could be a second too long, and the motherfucker just won't die!

I haul back with all my might and feel his chest give a heave. He's dropped the blade now and scrabbling at my forearms, but with barely enough strength to break skin. And then, he stops fighting. I feel the moment he gives up, and the life leaves him. It's like watching a mighty beast let go. But there's no time for regret now. I fling him away from me and leap to my feet, sprinting in the direction her voice had been coming from.

Chapter Eighteen

Kayla

I scream and thrash against the stinking blanket that's been thrown over me.

"Let me go!" I shout, kicking violently against the hands that are on my legs. They're pulling me along the deck. Alongside the yacht, I can hear the whine of a high-powered engine. I realize there's a motorboat cruising alongside, and it dawns on me that they're planning to get me on board. But there are shouts and gunfire coming from behind me, and I know I'm being dragged away from my only chance of escape.

Damn you!

I won't go down without a fight!

I struggle like a hellcat, shaking myself loose, hissing, and kicking, but there are too many of them. I scream again and lash out, raking nails over someone's cheek. He curses and aims a fist that cuffs the side of my head. It stuns me, and I'm suddenly being flung over someone's shoulder.

The indignity of the position is enhanced a thousand times by the fact that they still haven't given me anything to wear. I was hauled off the stage naked – aside from my heels – and that's how I've remained. My initial terror has now been replaced by pure rage at these animals who think they can treat me like I'm not even human.

As my head clears, I give another almighty scream and jam my knee forward viciously. It thumps into the chest of the man carrying me, and he doubles over, dropping me onto the deck. I scoot away from him awkwardly, only to crash straight into the shins of the vile toad who bought me.

He hauls me up by my arm, running his eyes over my bare chest and licking his moist, flaccid lips. If anything, the screams and bloodshed around us seem to be getting him off. He reaches a pale hand to stroke my breast.

I slap it away. "Touch me again, and you'll lose that hand," I snarl at him.

He gives an oily chuckle. "Ah...you have fight in you, my pretty. That is good. My clients love it when the girls fight to the end." I don't know what he's talking about, and I don't care either. His clients are never going to set eyes on me.

He's not a particularly big man, and when he reaches out to touch me again, I aim a fist at his cheek that lands hard enough to grind his teeth. His eyes glitter dangerously as he spits out blood and then grabs me by the throat.

"You're going to pay for that, girl," he snaps. I choke for air beneath his cruel fingers, clawing at his arms.

"Freeze!" a voice rings out. "Let her go, Doubel."

That voice!

Oh, my God!

The toad releases me like he's been shocked. We both spin around, and I almost feel my knees give way at the sight before us. A man is aiming a huge rifle at the toad's chest. His face is pale and blood-spattered, but his stance is steady. He flicks a look at me, and I scramble away from my suddenly quavering captor.

In an instant, I'm swept away by a flood of emotions. I rub my eyes to make sure I'm not seeing a ghost.

Timur!

"We...we were having a little fun," Claude stutters. All the bravado is gone now. In the face of a serious adversary,

he's a quivering wreck. I sense his thugs lurking closer and suck in a breath.

Oh my God, Timur!

He's alive!

He came for me!

“If anyone takes a step closer, I’m putting a slug in his chest,” Timur warns Claude’s bodyguards. They back off cautiously. Claude’s eyes are darting around in a panic. Timur glances over at me again, then gives a nod toward his side. I understand him immediately. I bolt over to stand behind him. My fingers curl into the coarse material of the heavy half jacket he’s wearing.

“You okay?” he asks me over his shoulder, not taking his eyes off the man in front of him.

“Uh-um,” I whisper hoarsely. My heart is thumping out of my chest. I still can’t believe that he’s here. How is he even standing?

“I should end your miserable life right now, you sick piece of shit,” he snarls at Claude, who cowers. “Throw me your jacket.”

The man scrabbles to remove his tuxedo jacket. He flings it awkwardly toward Timur, and it lands just short of his feet. “Put this on,” Timur tells me. I stoop quickly to pick it up and pull it around my shoulders. It stinks of the vile little man, but it’s a relief to be covered.

“Open that door and get in,” Timur orders the man standing in front of him. There’s a doorway leading into a small stateroom beside us. Claude looks longingly at the nearby speedboat, but Timur aims the rifle at the hull of the vessel and fires two shots into it. The man piloting it veers sharply away, and it disappears into the darkness. Claude gives a little bleat of dismay.

“In! Now!” Timur instructs. The men file into the room, and he slams it shut behind them, bolting it securely from the outside. He turns to face me.

I give a little sob.

And then I’m in his arms, my face pressed into his chest.

“Oh, God! Oh, God!” I can’t find words. Whatever vocabulary I had, has been reduced to a bunch of “*Oh Gods*”. All I know is I never want to let go of him. He’s still clutching

the rifle, but his free hand has me clasped firmly against him. He buries his face in my hair and breathes in.

“*Blyad!*” he exhales. “*Dushenka...* I thought I’d lost you!”

He leans back a little, and I tilt my head back to stare into his face. Even bloodied and battered, he’s pure beauty to me.

“Oh, my God! Timur! I thought you were dead!” I sob out. I can scarcely find my voice. He cups my cheek in his palm, and I press my hand against it to hold it more firmly there.

“You would not get rid of me that easily, *dushenka*,” He smiles crookedly. His voice is husky. I want to kiss his lips, his cheeks, his eyelids...and I do. “Stop,” he chuckles. “There will be time for that later. I need to get you out of this shithole first.” He glances around.

I still don’t really know what’s happening, but he’s clearly part of whatever is going on with the armed men who descended on the yacht. Grasping me firmly by the hand, he leads me back the way we came down the side of the yacht. I scamper alongside him on teetering heels, clutching the jacket closed over my chest.

And then there's a deafening crack, and Timur is thrown forward face-down on the deck.

"No!" I scream. I look down to see the back of his half-vest has been ripped open. He's just been shot in the back. How many times does this nightmare have to unfold in front of me?

Chapter Nineteen

Timur

I hear her drop to her knees at my side, tugging at my arm.

I groan and struggle to push myself up. The vest took the bullet, but the force of it still knocked the air out of me. I'm going to be black and blue for a week.

There's no time to be lying around, though. Someone has spun out of the shadows, and I sense something coming at me with force.

But Kayla's off the ground and propelling herself toward my attacker before I can even see who it is. I get to my haunches just in time to see her slam into his chest.

Vasiliy!

The arrogant fucker's still on the boat. "Missing me already, *kukolka?*" he says and chuckles.

"You fucking bastard!" she shrieks, raking her fingers down his cheek.

He grabs both her wrists in one of his hands and swings her roughly to his side. His eyes are on me, even though she's kicking out at him. In his other hand, a pistol is aimed at my face. No vest there. If he pulls the trigger, my brains are going to be splattered on the deck. I stand dead still.

"I should have known you wouldn't be so easy to get rid of, my friend," he says calmly. I narrow my eyes at him.

"Prekrati eto der'mo, Koslov," I reply. "I'm not your fucking friend."

He laughs and nods his head. "You are right, of course. You were playing the game. Planning this little escapade." He shakes his head. "I will admit, I had no idea you had infiltrated so far into my ranks."

He's pulled Kayla into the curve of his armpit, and she struggles against him, but he's too strong. The sight of it makes my blood boil. But I have to bide my time. She spits in his face, and he twists her wrists cruelly.

"Enough of that, Kayla. There will be plenty of time for foreplay when I get rid of this annoyance." He smirks at me.

"Let her go, Vasiliy," I say softly. "She means nothing to you."

“Oh, but she means the world to me, Timur. Did she tell you how we’ve passed the time while you were indisposed?” He glances down at her and leers. She shoots a look at me and then stares down at the deck. “I fucked her morning, noon, and night. That hot little cunt dripped for me every time.” Kayla gives a little whimper. “Ah, there’s that sound I remember. So good, yes, *kukolka?*”

His words seem to galvanize her because she tears her wrist from his grip and swings a fist at his face. He sideswipes her with the butt of the pistol. I hear the crack as it connects with her skull.

“Kayla!” I shout as I watch her knees sag, and she crumples to the floor. “*Pizda!*” I roar at him.

Without thinking, I lurch forward and close the distance between us. Vasiliy doesn’t get a chance to get a bead on me before my right hook slams into his jaw. His head snaps to the side, and he staggers back. But he rallies quickly, and then he’s on me. A fist smacks into my gut. On any other day, my stomach muscles may have borne the brunt, but today I’m completely winded. An uppercut rings my bell, and I go down on one knee.

I grit my teeth and clamp my arms around his shins, yanking him down to the floor. He hits the deck hard enough to give me a second to gain the upper hand. I roll on top of him and aim a flurry of blows at his face. I hear a crack as my fist lands and feel a swirl of satisfaction as I realize I've probably just broken his nose.

It's a brief reprieve. He bridges his body sharply and bucks me off him. I land on my chest on the deck once again. An arm hooked around my throat cuts off my air. I jam my elbow back in his ribs, and I'm rewarded by a grunt. But he tightens the choke, and I start to see stars.

Blyad!

This is not a good place to be. Yegor had probably had similar thoughts just a few minutes ago.

I clench my jaw, dip my chin, and lever a fraction of space beneath his forearm. With my chin still firmly tucked in, I manage to drag in a tiny breath as I haul at his wrist and yank it beneath my armpit.

Vasilij may be strong, but he's not battle-honed. When I bend his wrist backward, bones crunch, and he loosens his grip. By the time I have his arm below mine, I've managed to twist myself free, and I smack my head back into his face. My

skull meets with his already shattered nose. I drag myself away from him, crawling forward to put distance between us before I stand. I hear him scrambling to his feet behind me. And then I hear the metallic slide of his pistol being cocked.

“It’s going to be pretty hard to miss from here, Yakov,” he says coldly.

His voice has a nasal twang now, but it’s not really the time to be counting his broken nose as a victory. He’s going to shoot me in the head.

I turn slowly to face him, and my suspicions are confirmed. The barrel of the gun is aimed directly at my face. His eyes shine with sheer malice as his finger tightens on the trigger. I fix him with my own hard stare, determined not to show fear as the fucker snuffs me out. When the explosion goes off, I flinch.

Then, there’s silence.

But I’m not dead.

I blink, wondering what the hell just happened. Vasiliy’s face is slack with surprise. The pistol falls from suddenly limp fingers, and he glances down at his chest. A red stain is spreading on the crisp white of his dress shirt from beneath the

right lapel of his tuxedo. He looks up past me, and his lips move.

“Well played... *kukolka*,” he croaks out through pink-tinged lips.

I snap a look over my shoulder and see Kayla hefting my assault rifle. Her expression is as shocked as Vasiliy’s.

He staggers sideways with the motion of the yacht and grasps the side rail unsteadily. He’s shaking his head and giving a wry chuckle as if he can’t quite believe what just happened.

Neither can I.

“*Blyad*,” he gasps out and then coughs. “Hurts like a motherfucker!”

He puts a hand to his chest, and it comes back sticky with blood. He lurches against the railing just as the yacht crests a particularly large swell. And then he’s over the edge. And then, he’s falling. I rush to the side just in time to see him disappearing into the darkness behind the wake of the yacht.

Damn.

The fucker is finally gone.

It’s almost too dramatic to bear.

There's a clatter behind me, and I spin around to see Kayla raise her hands to her face. The rifle is at her feet. And she's sobbing. I'm at her side and wrapping my arms around her before her legs give way.

"I killed him!" she chokes out against my chest.

"Yes, it's over. You're okay," I murmur against her hair.

"I killed him," she groans it now. "I killed him..."

"It's okay, Kayla. You did good. It's all good."

Chapter Twenty

Kayla

I stare up into his face.

He's clearly taken a beating, and I want to stroke the pain away. But he sweeps me up against him. The horror of what just happened is swirling around me like a cloud. Vasiliy may have been pure evil, but killing him...

I shudder again, and Timur seems to sense what's on my mind. His face lowers, and when his lips meet mine, I no longer hear the clamor around us. I twine my arms around his neck, my eyes hot with unshed tears. I sob as I return his kiss. His arms are strong around me, every inch of him alive and vital. For a precious moment, I imagine it's just the two of us alone surrounded by the ocean. The way we were on the beach. Just us in a world of simple joy.

I can't imagine another minute of my life without this man.

He pulls back reluctantly, and we're both breathless. I'm certain I'm starry-eyed, which seems impossible, considering the circumstances. He rests his forehead against mine and squeezes his eyes shut for a second. When they open again, they're tortured.

"Dushkena... I thought you were gone. I thought..." He trails off.

"I'm right here," I whisper, brushing my nose against his. "You saved me."

"No, *you* saved *me*," he whispers back. "Not just now. Right from the start." He cups my face in his hands and the tears that have been threatening spill over now. "You do not know how far gone I was when you arrived in my world. You brought me back from the brink."

I try to laugh through my tears, but the sound is strangled. "Are you serious? Do you have any idea what a mess my life was? Being abducted by you was actually a step up!"

He shakes his head, not letting me laugh off the seriousness of the moment. "You do not know how much it tore me apart to imagine what you were going through. And there was nothing I could do about it."

I swallow hard. “I thought you were dead – when I saw you go down, my world came to an end.” When I inhale, the air shudders into my lungs. “Timur...those things he said...” I don’t want to say it, but I can’t let it go without acknowledging Vasiliy’s words. About what he’d done to me. The sex. It will hang between us forever.

And as for the baby...

“Shh...” he murmurs, brushing his lips over mine. “You did what you had to do to survive, Kayla. It’s what I love about you – you’re a survivor.”

My smile is watery, but I force one anyway. “The only thing you love about me?” I try to make my tone teasing. I fail miserably. His answer means too much to me.

“One of many,” he replies. “Too many...because I love everything about you. You know that, yes?”

I press my lips together and dip my head. He lifts my chin with his fingertip.

“I love you, Kayla,” he murmurs. “Is it too soon to tell you that?”

I shake my head. It’s barely been a couple of months, but I’ve shared a lifetime with this man. He “gets” me better

than anyone I've ever known. "Your timing's perfect, actually," I say brokenly. "Because I kinda love you too."

"Kinda?" He raises his brow and tugs me closer. It occurs to me again that I'm naked beneath the jacket. I'm pressed up against the rough fabric of his battle vest. I half-wonder if it would be odd to develop a fetish for military gear around now.

"Kinda completely," I say. "Completely and utterly," I add. "Head over heels. I'm a goner."

"So, you have not decided, then?" he teases. I give a hiccupping little laugh. And then shouts around me draw my attention out to the water where more of Timur's team are rounding up men who'd been trying to make their getaway. As I look past the railing, my eyes fix to the point where Vasilii had tumbled overboard. His blood still streaks the white surface. I feel a bubble of horror rise up my throat.

"Oh God, Timur..." I feel myself begin to shiver. "I just killed someone!"

Chapter Twenty-One

Timur

I know this moment.

Even putting down a rabid dog will leave you filled with remorse. Especially that first time.

Her whole body is shuddering against mine as shock settles in. I pull her more firmly against me. The jacket is barely long enough to skim her ass, and I know I need to get her dressed and out of here.

“What the fuck just happened here?” Gusev’s voice breaks into the moment. He’s appeared beside us, flanked by a pair of our teammates. They all keep their eyes firmly away from Kayla’s exposed curves.

I jerk my head at the spot where Vasily took his last dive. “Koslov just took a round in the chest. Went overboard,” I say. I’m not releasing my hold on Kayla.

“You?” Gusev asks. I shake my head and dip my chin slightly. He gets my meaning.

“She okay?” he asks.

“She will be. Just need to get her out of here. I have to get back to the Koslov place. Nika’s there.”

“We have emergency vehicles waiting,” he says. “We will get Kayla over to the hospital for a once-over. I’ve got a team prepped to hit the house now, and our people are still in there. You can come along if you’re up to it. I doubt we will meet much resistance.”

“No!” Kayla says sharply, pulling away from me and twisting her head to face him. “I’m going with!”

“No, you’re not,” Gusev says. She shoots daggers at him with her eyes.

“Kayla, listen to him,” I try to soothe her. “He’s a friend.” I glance at him, and his expression softens...a fraction. It’s a significant gesture coming from Gusev. The man’s granite.

“I’m not leaving you,” she says fiercely, and my heart melts. “Please...”

I heave a sigh. I’m reluctant to let her out of my sight, too. “Fine,” I say with a look up at Gusev, who shrugs. “But

you get checked over by the paramedics first. And we find you some clothes.”

I feel the tension rush out of her. “Anything!” she says.

“And you stay with the support crew when we go in.”

I feel her stiffen and then give in. “Yes. Just as long as you’re not far.”

I pull her closer. “Never again,” I say against her hair.

Koslov’s mansion is ablaze with light when we arrive.

As promised, Kayla hangs back with the vehicles on the outer perimeter. Gusev has assigned a female officer to her, who seems to know how to work with women in her situation. Victims of abuse. Because essentially, that’s what Kayla is. I’m bracing myself for when that sinks in. It’s inevitable that she’s going to come crashing down at some point. And when she does, I’ll be right there.

But now, Nika needs me.

Gusev and I are with the advance team when we descend upon the place. We're heavily armed and swarm the place, but it hardly seems necessary. Koslov's men surrender without a fight. It's only when the front door swings open, and I see Giselle stride out with my daughter in tow that I raise my rifle and take aim.

"Yakov! Stand down!" Gusev barks at me. I'm not budging. As the woman wavers before me, I see Nika tugging firmly at her hand.

"Papa!" she shrieks, trying to reach me. The bitch won't let her go. When she swings Nika into her arms and hurries down the stairs with her, I take aim at her forehead.

"Jesus, Yakov, stand the fuck down!" Gusev yells. His hand is on my arm. I spin a look at him. "She's one of us, *dolboyob!*" he snaps.

Giselle reaches us and sets Nika down. My daughter closes the space separating us and throws herself against my legs. I cautiously pass the rifle to Gusev, then swoop her into my arms.

"Papa! You came back!" she wails.

“Of course, I did, *malyshka*,” I whisper against her cheek.

Her little arms have locked around my neck, and I cradle her firmly. I glance past Gusev and look from him to Giselle and back.

“Yakov, I believe you know Agent Green,” Gusev says.

My mouth drops open as Giselle nods at me curtly.

“Green?” I practically choke out.

She nods briskly. “That’s right,” she replies.

“*Blyad*. But how...?” It makes no sense. I was calling her to check in when she was in my home all along.

“Our crew were simply patching your calls to her,” Gusev explains. “Giselle ran the team with Collette and Emmanuelle, who would come back here to prep the girls. It was the best way to know how many were coming through here. As for Vasiliy, he never suspected a thing. The fucker was too busy looking over his shoulder for infiltrators who might appear to be a danger – like you. Never imagined his biggest threat was coming from his own ‘girls.’”

“*Blyad*... why didn’t you say anything?” I ask. I’m suddenly flooded by the memory of beating her with my belt.

She must realize what's on my mind because as Gusev looks aside, she aims a wink at me.

“Need to know only, Yakov,” she answers.

I frown darkly. “Of all people, surely I would need to know the most?” I mutter. “My daughter was trapped here, after all.”

“That's precisely why. We were afraid you might be compromised,” she says crisply. It is bizarre to hear her speaking without the exaggerated French accent.

“Among other things, of course,” Gusev adds. I narrow my eyes at him. “You did good here, Yakov, but don't forget how you got into this position.”

I nod slowly. My past still hounds me.

“Not to mention that you nearly blew this whole damn operation out of the water with that little stunt you pulled with the girl,” he continues.

I set my jaw as I stare over at Giselle – or Green – *blyad*, I still can't get over it. “Why the hell wouldn't you let her stay with me? It was safe there.” She'd been the one to convince Vasiliy that Kayla needed to leave. I'd had to change his mind. Maybe she'd deserved that damn beating after all.

“I ordered it. Because we did not want to raise Koslov’s suspicions,” Gusev butts in bluntly. He’d never been one for mincing words. “Besides, we needed all the girls in one place for when we launched our offensive. We didn’t want to lose anyone.”

“Well, that worked out just perfectly, didn’t it?” I snap back. “And if you think I’d have willingly sent Kayla into that Koslov’s lair, you would be dead wrong.”

He shrugs, seemingly remorseless. “There’s no accounting for lunacy,” he says. “Koslov was a loose fucking cannon. It’s a good thing he’s been taken out. Wouldn’t want to risk him getting out of the system on a technicality.”

Nika stirs against me, and Gusev looks sheepish for a second. “Sorry for the language, Miss,” he mutters to Nika. “Don’t you think you should be getting her someplace safe?” he asks me.

“She *is* someplace safe,” I reply. “Right here with me.” I brush my lips against her silky curls. “Papa’s never letting you go again, you hear me?”

“Mmm-hmm,” she murmurs into my neck.

She's feeling heavier, though, and I heft her weight up higher. I should probably get her back to the backup crew. But somehow, they seem an awfully long way away.

"You got any more of those drugs of yours?" I ask Gusev, who shakes his head.

"I already gave you a second dose before we got here. You don't want to go OD-ing on that stuff."

Dammit.

I'm fading quickly.

"I'll get her back to the others," I say, turning and striding toward the waiting vans. By the time I get there, I'm wheezing for breath. A side door slides open abruptly, and Kayla bounds out, along with a medic.

"Kayla!" Nika says brightly and squirms away from me to reach for Kayla. I frown in confusion, particularly when the pair cling to each other like long-lost relatives.

"You need to check her out," I mutter to the medic, but his eyes are narrowed on me.

"Will do in a moment," he answers. "Right now, I'm more worried about you."

I grunt in disagreement, but suddenly my legs don't want to support me.

“Timur!” Kayla gasps from where she's still locked in an embrace with my daughter. “You're bleeding!”

I look down and see fat red droplets streaming off my fingers. I've left a trail of blood behind me, and it's soaked into my shirt and through my vest. Even Nika's stained with it.

“*Blyad!*” I mutter, but my voice seems to be coming from miles away.

And then the lights go out.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Timur

There's that infernal beeping again.

The sense of being pinned down by tubes and pipes.
The bitter taste in my mouth.

Kayla...Nika!

Vasiliy vzyal ikh!

I shoot up abruptly, realizing it's all been a vivid dream. Waiting for Gusev to charge in with his syringe of wonder drugs. But instead, I turn to see Kayla in a chair beside my bed. Nika is curled up on her lap, her cheek resting on her shoulder. The pair are fast asleep, and my heart clenches almost painfully.

I slump back against the pillows.

My body hurts in ways that seem entirely unhealthy, but I'm alive. *Thank fuck!* And Nika and Kayla are both safe here. I allow myself to close my eyes and hear the beeping settling

into a stable rhythm. But the upset has been enough to have a nurse bustling in.

“Ah, Mr. Yakov, you’re awake,” she says softly, shooting a look over at where Kayla’s still fast asleep. “I’m sure you’re not opposed to having your visitors here with you?” I smile and nod, and she goes on, “I don’t think we could have dissuaded them, anyway. Quite a determined young woman you have there.” She chuckles.

I want to reach out to touch the pair of them, but I’m reluctant to wake them. They seem so peaceful there. And the relief of seeing both my girls safe together is completely overwhelming. But as I watch, I see Kayla’s eyes flutter slightly and then open. As she sees me awake, they widen. She straightens carefully, clearly reluctant to disturb the child on her lap.

“Good morning,” I murmur. Her smile is as radiant as the sun. “I’m guessing it’s morning?” I aim my question at the nurse, who nods and beams broadly.

“I’ll call Doctor to come in and check on you,” she says. “I’m sure you’d appreciate a bit of privacy too.” She bustles out the door, and I turn my attention back to Kayla.

“How are you feeling?” I ask, and she chuckles.

“You’re kidding, right? You’re the one in the hospital bed.”

I grin wryly. “I suppose you are right. What the fu—” I glance at Nika. “What happened?”

“Umm...you do remember that you recently played pinball with a bunch of bullets, right?” She shakes her head at me. “The doctor says you tore open internal wounds that hadn’t healed up yet. You’d been bleeding internally for a couple of hours. The stitches you pulled in your shoulder were just the tip of the iceberg. But luckily it happened because if you hadn’t seen your own blood, you’d probably have tried to carry on!”

I give a rueful smile. She’s probably right. “How’s my girl?” I ask softly. Nika’s stirring but remains asleep.

“Won’t leave your side,” Kayla answers. “Neither will I.” Her words warm my heart. “That’s still okay, right?” she adds hesitantly.

“Better than okay,” I say. “If you hadn’t been here when I woke, I’d have gone looking for you! Both of you.”

“That won’t be necessary,” she says and reaches her hand to me. I twine my fingers through hers, though I don’t try

to draw her nearer. I can see she's not letting go of my child. I love that somehow.

“How did you get to know Nika?” I ask. This situation has grown more convoluted than my medication-addled mind can comprehend.

“I met her while I was with Vasiliy,” she says softly. She brushes her lips over Nika's glossy hair, and I can see real affection here. “He introduced us.”

“Introduced you?” I frown. “Why would he do that?”

She pauses a moment. There's something that flickers across her face. “He told me that if I didn't...” She bites her lip. “If I didn't do as he...as he said, he would hurt her.” She whispers the last. Understanding sinks in, and I feel heat rise to my face in a rush of rage that sets the monitors beeping again.

Good thing the motherfucker is dead otherwise I'd rip his goddamn heart out.

“You did that to save her?” I grind out. She gives a slight shrug, her cheek pressed against the top of Nika's head.

“Anyone would have done the same,” she murmurs.

“That’s bullshit!” I say sharply. “He ra—” I stop short. I can’t say the word. But that’s precisely what it was. He raped her, and she let him so that he wouldn’t harm my child. My rage continues to swirl. I wish I’d been the one to kill the motherfucker. Except it would have been slower. I’d have carved him up a bit. Fed pieces of him to the fishes. Maybe to him too.

“I will never be able to repay you,” I say hoarsely.

She gives a small smile. “This is my repayment,” she says. Her arms tighten around Nika, who heaves a deep sigh and seems to drag herself from slumber.

“Kayla?” she says, tilting her head back and stretching. Then she looks at me. “*Papa!* You woke up!” Her voice brightens, shedding the thickness of sleep.

“*Da, malyshka.*” I smile back at her.

“We were so worried about you!” she says. “Kayla cried!”

I glance at Kayla, who pinches her lips together. “It was a moment of weakness,” she says. “We knew you were going to be fine, right, Nika?” She looks into my daughter’s wide,

open face. I have to swallow a lump in my throat. There's not a thing about this woman that's weak.

"Papa's like superman," Nika agrees. "He can take out baddies in his sleep! Kapow!"

Kayla nods sagely. "I've seen it with my very own eyes." She looks over at me. For the umpteenth time, my heart melts a little. At the rate I'm going, there'll be nothing there but a puddle pretty soon.

There's a light tap at the door, and it opens to reveal Dr. Littleton, who shakes his head at me.

"What did I say to you before you left here, Mr. Yakov?" he says sternly.

"That you didn't want any fallout," I reply.

He pauses, then grins. "Ah. Touché," he chuckles. "What I should have added was that you shouldn't exert yourself unduly. But I see how I would have been wasting my breath." He has my chart in his hand. "Nevertheless, we managed to patch you up fairly well. You'll make a recovery to full health – which I'm sure you'll squander if past events are anything to go by."

“I’d do it again in a heartbeat,” I say. But my words are aimed at Kayla, who still has her fingers threaded through mine. She squeezes them lightly. I really want to pull her closer now. I’m suddenly feeling better. Much better! And there are far too many people in this room.

“When can I get out of here, Doc?” I say to Littleton.

He rolls his eyes. “Why? So you can rupture something else?”

“No. So I can take care of other...business.” My eyes are back on Kayla. Her cheeks flush prettily.

“Monkey business, you mean?” says the doctor, who suddenly seems a lot less stuffy than the first time I met him.

Nika gives a giggle. “My papa’s not a monkey!” she bursts out.

“Of course not, dear,” Dr. Littleton says warmly.

“Though he certainly acts like one sometimes.” He glances at where Kayla and I are locked in each other’s gazes. “Say, did you see there’s a machine outside that gives you candy if you put money in it?”

Nika looks from me to Kayla and then at the doctor.

“Yup,” she replies, sliding off Kayla’s lap. “I think you should

take me to get a Snickers bar, Doctor.” She lowers her voice dramatically. “Coz’ I think they need to kiss!”

Chapter Twenty-Three

Kayla

“Is she asleep?” Timur asks as I quietly shut the bedroom door behind me.

I nod and breathe a sigh of relief. It’s been mere hours since he was released from the hospital with strict instructions to stay in bed. I’ve been in a bit of a state trying to make sure everything was perfect for his return. Though it’s really just my nerves playing up – there’s an entire contingent of staff who take care of these things.

But *I* wanted to do them.

I wanted the house to be perfect when he walked through the door. I wanted to arrange flowers in the hallway, and I wanted to have a meal in the oven. I wanted him to see Nika’s room, which I’ve spent the past few days turning into a fairy wonderland with her. I want to make my mark on this place. Because although we’ve shared so many feelings with each other, nothing has been written in stone yet.

What if he's changed his mind?

What will he do when he finds out about the baby?

His eyes are on me as I cross the room to the side of the bed. He's resting back against a mound of pillows that I propped up for him. His chest is crisscrossed with bandages, but if anything, it only emphasizes the broad, muscular lines. How does a man look so damn delicious after being so severely injured?

I smooth the coverlet he's lying on and check the jug of freshly squeezed orange juice on the bedside table. I'm about to reach for it when he snaps out a hand and grasps my wrist.

"Stop," he says, then pulls me down toward him. I perch cautiously on the edge of the bed. "You're fussing too much," he murmurs, reaching to stroke my cheek. "You look more exhausted than I am."

He may have a point. I've barely slept while he's been in hospital. Frankly, I'd barely slept for weeks before while I was locked up in that place. Then it was the terror of the situation. Now, it's to fend off the demons.

"She adores you," he says softly, and I smile.

"I adore her too," I reply.

After all we went through together, Nika and I have clung to each other like survivors on a life raft. It's almost impossible to believe that our ordeal is finally over. After he'd tucked her in this evening, she'd pleaded with me to sit with her till she nodded off.

I haven't admitted to him that I've slept with her each night. I'm almost as reluctant to leave her as she was to let me go. But she seems settled now that he's home. And even more settled when she sees us together. There'll be a conversation that we must have with her once Timur and I discuss our future together. But I'm pretty confident it's going to be a happy discussion.

Unless he's changed his mind.

And he may definitely change it when I tell him about the child. Especially if the child is not his.

"How are you feeling?" I ask, eyes searching his face for anything that might be troubling. His gaze is so intense it almost makes me uncomfortable.

"I'd feel better if you were closer," he says softly. I scoot an inch forward and then gasp as he pulls me down against his chest.

“Your stitches!” I say sharply, anxiously trying to keep my weight off him.

“They’ll hold,” he says, tugging me harder against him. He runs his free hand down the side of my face and cups his fingers around the back of my neck. Then my lips are pressed against his as he draws me in for a kiss that has my toes curling. When I pull back, I’m breathless. There’s a flame beginning to flicker that I struggle to quench.

“Careful,” I murmur. “You may start something you can’t finish.” I’m teasing him, but his expression is serious.

“I’ll never be finished with you, Kayla.” He still has his hand cupped behind my head. When I try to rise, he holds me firm.

“Timur! I’m going to hurt you!” I have my fingers splayed across his chest, trying not to touch anything that might cause him pain. He’s a patchwork of bruises and dressings but doesn’t seem remotely bothered by it.

“*Dushenka*, it only hurts when you’re too far away,” he says.

“But the doctor—” I begin.

“That doctor told me I couldn’t go after you when I told him I needed to save you. Imagine how that would have turned out. I’m taking his advice with a pinch of salt,” he says. His fingers have strayed from my neck and are now trailing beneath the robe I put on earlier. “Besides, he never put any limits on the amount of TLC I might need.”

I lick my lips as he slides the robe over my shoulders. “I- I guess that’s a good point.” My voice is husky. He’s running his palm up and down the smooth line of my upper arm. Each move pushes the robe lower until I lift myself over him and pull my arms entirely free.

Now I’m left in the nightgown I’d slipped into after my bath. A creamy, frothy scrap of satin and lace that ties elaborately down from my cleavage to my thighs. It had felt a little indulgent to wear it. I was still convinced he’d be too weak to appreciate the gesture. But that didn’t mean I couldn’t be pretty for him...

“Fuck, you are so beautiful,” he whispers, stroking the waves of my hair back over my shoulders. He’s touching me like some sort of fragile piece of art. Meanwhile, *he’s* the one who needs careful handling. He could have died. It still shakes

me to think of it. I grab his hand impulsively and pull it to my lips.

“I can’t lose you again,” I say fiercely.

I don’t care if we haven’t discussed this officially. I’ll fight to the death for him. There’s no point in pussyfooting around my feelings.

“You won’t, *dushenka*.” His expression is earnest. “I’m playing for keeps. I’ve failed too many others – my mother. Tanya. Even Nika. I won’t fail either of you now.”

“Oh my God, Timur! How could you possibly say you failed me?” I shift over and straddle his hips. I can feel that he’s naked beneath the sheet that drapes his hips. My body responds automatically to the growing hardness I feel there. “You took a bullet for me,” I remind him. “Three! And that was before you came back for more after dragging yourself out of hospital. You’re like some kind of superhero.”

He shakes his head and gives a wry chuckle. “You bring out the best in me,” he replies. He’s toying with the lace that holds the top of my nightdress closed. When he tugs at it, a lush swell of flesh bursts free. “Fuck...” he exhales. “These tits. I could have walked through hell itself just get another look at these.” The gown is now completely open, and his

palms cup my breasts. He sits up, closing his mouth over a sharply puckering nipple.

“Oh!” I exhale the word, arching toward him and letting my head drop back.

Stubble brushes against my sensitive skin. It sends a zing of desire into my core. When his mouth moves to take in my other nipple, I’m breathless, running my fingers roughly into his hair and holding his face against me. He moans into my soft flesh, and it’s a sound that echoes into me. But I feel him shudder a little. Concerned, I push him back.

“No exertion, remember?” I warn him huskily. He frowns and makes a low growling sound, but I muffle his protest by dangling a nipple into his mouth. His tongue is hot on my flesh, and the heat travels to that zinging point between my thighs again. It has me clenching my muscles tightly. When he switches his attention to my other nipple, I moan low in my throat.

His hands are still on the laces of my nightdress, tugging the clinging garment free from me. By the time he pulls it off me, I’m panting with need for him. His chest is heaving too. For a moment, I’m afraid it’s too much, but when I pause anxiously, his hand cups my pussy. With only the

lightest pressure, his fingers slip in. They're glistening when he raises them to his mouth and tastes me on his fingertips.

"I could eat you for breakfast, lunch, and dinner," he murmurs.

I swallow hard. But then he's shifting down and tugging me further up his torso, and somehow, I'm straddling his face.

"Timur!" I gasp. "You can't—" I start to object.

"I'm not going to break, *dushenka*." His mouth closes over my clit, and I forget what I'd been meaning to say.

"Oh, my God!" I choke, latching both hands onto the headboard behind him.

When he drills a finger into my heat and crooks it, I cling to the headboard to stop myself from crumpling onto him. He keeps up the maddening suction and adds another finger.

"Fuck!" I cry out as a wave of pleasure builds and then engulfs me as he pushes a third finger deep inside me and curls it against my G-spot. I feel filled to the brim, my eyes watering with the intensity of it. The bed creaks as I thrust my hips forward in a rhythm that matches the pumping of his fingers. When the orgasm hits, I barely hear the sound of the

headboard crashing against the wall as I use it to steady my erratic movements.

My fingers are white-knuckled as I struggle to keep my shuddering thighs from giving way. It's all I can do to stop myself from collapsing on top of him as he gradually eases the pressure. I can't find my breath, but already he's maneuvered me back down his chest.

"Better?" he teases as he pulls me face-to-face with him again. I feel myself flush at the sight of his gleaming face, but I grin and lick at his lips and chin.

"So much better," I reply. "And you're right...I *do* taste good!"

I stretch myself along the length of his lean body. I can feel the heat of his cock pushing insistently against me through the thin sheet...taunting. He slides his hand into my hair, twisting his fingers into it roughly, and pulls me in for a kiss that has me gasping again. The subsiding tingle of my waning orgasm has only made me hungrier for him.

I fumble to get the sheet out from between us, wanting to feel his naked skin against mine. Wanting him inside me more than I need air. When I clamber over him and curl my fingers around his shaft, his breath hisses between his teeth. I

shoot a glance at his face. His eyes are glittering as they meet mine.

“Fuck...don’t stop...” he grits out.

I hover over him for a second, thighs spread wide. I slide his cockhead along the length of my slit and feel my lips splay open wetly to receive him. I make a sound like a small sob as I lower myself and feel my body stretching around his thickness.

I’d truly believed this would never happen again. I keep my eyes locked on his as I inch myself down his length. By the time I’m fully seated, we’re both panting like we’ve just run a marathon.

“Jesus...” he groans. “We fit together so perfectly...it’s like you have all my missing pieces.” His smile is pained. “But if you move a muscle, it’s going to be over for me.”

I swallow hard. I know what he means. Just the movement of his breathing is touching things inside me that could set me off like a rocket.

“I don’t want it to end just yet,” I whisper. “I want this moment to last.” I’m not just talking about the sex. I mean this

thing between us. The intensity that I'm so afraid is going to end if I come clean about everything in my world right now.

The baby.

The confusion.

But it's hard to focus on all of that right now. A prickle of sensation is rippling down my spine and up from my groin to my nipples. I can see from his short, shallow breaths that he's holding himself back, too.

"It's going to last, Kayla. All our lives..." He cups my cheek with his palm, and I press my lips into it. "If you'll have me?" he asks. "Will you spend your life with me?"

"Do you even have to ask?" I blurt.

"Yes," he whispers. "And I'm asking now. Will you marry me?"

I fight down a tiny moan. "Oh, God!" My breath is shuddering into me. "Yes! Of course...yes!"

The thrill of it is so overwhelming that it overshadows the tension I've been feeling about broaching the subject that's been on my mind. But who could blame me? I never thought this was something that could happen. Someone wanting me the way he does.

He just asked me to marry him!

His hand has dropped to my hip, and he uses it to steady me as he rolls his pelvis up and thrusts into me. The motion is enough to take me straight over the edge. I cry out and throw my head back, my chest thrusting forward. His hands rove over my breasts, rolling my nipples between thumb and forefingers. It's all just too much. I'm a hot mess, and I grind down onto him.

"Bozhe moy! Look at you!" he chokes out. I can't see what he can, but I feel it, and I'm too deep in the throes of my orgasm to respond. Every nerve ending in my body is on fire, and I can feel my muscles clenching around him as if they were trying to draw out every last ounce of pleasure from our connection. Pleasure is rippling through my body like a wave, and each pulse of it sends a jolt of electricity through me. It's so intense, so mind-numbing that I can barely keep my eyes open. I want to savor every second, but it's just too much for me. I surrender to the wave and let it carry me away.

The feeling is indescribable; it's like being in two places at once – both inside my own body and outside of it looking in on this beautiful thing that we are creating together. His eyes

are still locked on mine as his own climax nears and his thrusting grows more desperate.

When I collapse over his chest to let the wave crash around me, I feel him surge up to meet me as his own climax takes him. I rest there with my face pressed into his neck as I struggle to get my galloping heart under control.

“Kayla,” he whispers breathlessly into the shell of my ear. I turn my face to look at him. “Kayla Yakov.” I feel a smile start to form.

“I think I like the sound of that.”

But then I feel my smile fade. What will he say when he finds out I’m carrying a child? And what will he say when he finds out that it may not be his?

Chapter Twenty-Four

Timur

We're basking in the afterglow.

Kayla is warm and soft and warm as I pull her up against my body and feel her nestling there. For the first time, for as long as I can remember, I am content. There's no threat of Koslov taking her from me. Nika is safe. My home feels like a haven, and no one can touch us. Even the old memories have lost their sharp edges.

I press my lips against the top of her head, feeling the silkiness of her hair. She heaves a deep sigh. I give a slight frown. The sound she makes should be a happy one, but somehow, it's not.

"What is it, *dushenka*?" I look down at her. She's silent for too long. "Is there something upsetting you?" I could almost kick myself as I say it. The woman has been through hell and back. Of course, she's upset.

She looks up at me, her eyes deep pools. “It’s... it’s nothing,” she murmurs.

“I understand. What he did to you...”

She shakes her head. “Nothing he did can touch me now that I’m here with you.”

Her words are brave, but I think it will be a long time before that nightmare fades. But I will be there every step of the way, wiping the stink of that animal from her soul.

“I will always take care of you.” I place kiss the top of her head again. “You and Nika will always be safe.”

She gives a small nod, but I can feel that she’s stiffened slightly. Something is wrong. I know it.

“Kayla?” I lift her chin with the tip of my finger when she dips her head and hides her eyes from me. “Tell me...” I press.

“What if...” She swallows thickly. “What if it’s not just me and Nika you have to take care of?” she asks in a tiny voice.

I feel confusion swirl. “Not just you and Nika?”

“What if there was...someone else?”

I give a small shake of my head. “You said you had no relatives...friends. But if there is anyone, they are welcome. You can bring a tribe and it will be fine with me. Where are they?”

She presses her lips together. “Here.”

Now I’m really confused. “Here? Who is here, Kayla.” She’s not making any sense.

“I’m pregnant, Timur.”

My stomach lurches.

Bozhe moy!

Did she say pregnant?

I pull away from her slightly and stare down at her in surprise. “Pregnant?” Shock colors my voice.

She goes rigid as tension floods her. “Oh God.” She lifts a hand and covers her face with it. “Oh fuck... I knew this was a mistake.”

“What is a mistake, *dushenka?*” I ask, prying her fingers away from where they cover her eyes.

“All of it,” she groans, shutting her eyes tightly to avoid looking at me.

“A baby is never a mistake, Kayla.” I keep my voice gentle. If she’s pregnant, she needs reassurance right now more than anything.

She unscrews her eyes to look at me. “Do you really believe that?” There’s a hint of hope in her voice and I’m glad she has enough faith in me to ask.

“Of course!” I gather her against me. She’s soft and pliant now, her body melting into mine as if she’s been waiting for this moment. “A child is a gift.” I brush my lips against hers. The feeling of contentment I’d felt before is joined by an overwhelming joy.

It’s not long before Kayla puts space between us, though. “The timing, Timur... It’s—”

“Fuck the timing.” I pull her close again. “This is perfect. *You* are perfect.” I slide my hand down her torso, grazing her full breasts and settling my palm over her belly.

Holy fuck, she’s pregnant!

“But you don’t understand, Timur...” she says brokenly.

“I understand all that I need to. A baby.” I shake my head in wonder, my fingers tracing circles over the skin where

I can imagine life quickening. “We are having a child. You bring a blessing into our world, *dushenka*.”

“But— but what if it’s not yours, Timur? When Vasily... He... I...” She makes a small sobbing sound. “Oh, God! I’m so sorry!” Her hand is over her face again and I feel her body shaking against mine. “Timur... I don’t know what to do!”

A realization begins to dawn. Of course, she’s freaking out. But either way, I don’t care if the child is Vasily’s. I will still raise it as my own and she needs to know that.

“Do?” I frown at this. “You will grow a life inside you. That is what you will do. And there is absolutely nothing to be sorry for.”

“But what if it’s his?” Her voice rises as if she’s fighting down hysteria.

“I don’t care who fathered it. I know whose it is. Yours. This baby is yours. And that makes it mine too.”

“But he was a monster!”

“That is not the child’s fault. He will be pure. Who cares whose blood runs through his veins?”

“It might be a girl,” she whispers, and I find myself smiling.

“Yes. It might be a girl. With eyes like her mother’s. And hair like the finest chocolate.” I inhale the shampooed scent of the curls that are pressed against my cheek. Kayla’s head is resting against my shoulder and I can feel her relax as I stroke her hair. “Girl or boy. It makes no difference. I will love our baby.”

“Even if it’s Vasiliy’s?”

“A child should never be judged because of who their father is.” I pull her closer. We lay like that for a minute. I can feel her trembling slightly, and I sense that she’s fighting down small sobs.

“That’s how it should be,” she murmurs after a while, her voice muffled against my skin. “A baby should be loved.”

“Yes. And your daughter will be blessed with a mother who loves her unconditionally.” I take in the sight of this woman who has accepted me wholeheartedly despite my faults and imperfections. She has taught me to love deeply and without reservation – not just for this unborn baby but for myself as well.

I don't care who fathered the baby as long as she is with me.

Kayla lifts her head to look up at me and I can see tears shimmering in her eyes. "And you," she says softly, "will give our child both acceptance and protection."

"Forever," I tell her. "We are a family now. You and me and Nika and her new brother or sister."

Her lips twitch up at the corners. "A family." The word seems to fill her with wonder. "I always wanted a family."

I remember those idyllic hours on the beach when she'd told me of the childhood she had endured. Neglect. Abuse. Fucking junkie parents. I'm amazed at the woman she's grown into despite all her challenges. So strong and resilient. Still able to smile up at me after all that she'd been through – some of which was by my own hand. I'm going to spend a lifetime making it up to her.

"Yes. A family. I will give you a family. And anything else you ask for." Determination fills me. What this woman has given me – the life I'd thought I'd lost, the chance to try again – is worth more than money or material things could ever match. If I can just return some small part of that, I'll be happy.

It's almost hard to believe how lucky I am.

Especially after everything I had done.

Her eyes search my face as if she's looking for a sign that I'm not being honest with her. She can look all she wants. She's not going to find anything. I've never been more sure of anything in my life.

Finally, satisfied, she heaves out a breath. Her body relaxes with it.

"Thank you," she says, her eyes shining with gratitude.

"Thank *you*," I respond. "You are going to be the most wonderful mother. And as soon as you're ready, you're going to make the most wonderful wife."

She doesn't answer with words. Love shines from her eyes as she wraps her arms around my neck and presses her lips against mine. They part eagerly as I slide my tongue along them and then deepen the kiss into something more heated.

It doesn't matter that it's only been minutes since I was inside her. I want her again. I'll want her always. And I have every intention of showing her that every day for the rest of our lives.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Kayla

“You look like a princess, Kayla,” Nika says, her beautiful dark eyes wide as she looks me up and down.

She reaches a hesitant hand to touch the lace of my dress, and I take her little fingers in mine.

“And you’re *my* princess too, Nika Love,” I respond. Outside, I can hear the strident tones of Gustav, my wedding coordinator. Timur had been determined to arrange this wedding in under a month and was worried about putting pressure on me. It makes me smile.

My new life has less pressure than I’ve ever had to deal with. For weeks, all I’ve had to do is devote my heart to these two precious souls in my world. After the wedding, I’ll take some time to find a new direction in my life. But for now, this is enough. Helping my small family heal. Learning to believe that I deserve all this love.

It’s like a fairytale.

“Come! Come! Come!” I hear Gustav call out. He’s clapping his hands in time with the words. “My bride will be ready in ten. Make it snappy. I want things to be *spectacular!*” I chuckle at his brisk instructions. He’s fussed around me like a mother hen.

Nika has turned her attention to the hem of her dress, fidgeting a little. I’m certain she’s growing apprehensive about her role. I go down on my haunches in front of her and smooth my hands over her silky curls.

“You’re the prettiest flower girl in the world, Nika Love. I’m so glad you’re walking down the aisle with me,” I murmur and dot a kiss on her forehead. Her eyes meet mine, then drop shyly. “What is it, sweetheart?” I ask.

“Papa was married before, you know,” she says softly.

“I know, Nika,” I say, stifling a smile. “That’s how he has you.”

“My mama went to heaven when I was a baby.” She gnaws on her lip. “I don’t even remember her.”

I tug her against my chest. “Nika, your head might not remember, but your heart will never forget.”

She nods sagely. “I think you’re right. My heart will never forget you either, Kayla.”

I struggle to hold back tears. Gustav will have a fit if I smudge my mascara. “You don’t need to worry about that, my love. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Do you...do you think she’ll be sad if I want to call you Mama, too?” Nika says suddenly. The lump in my throat stops me from answering right away, so I shake my head instead.

“I think she would understand, Nika,” I whisper. “And it would make me so very happy too.” She slides her soft little arms around my neck, and I breathe in her sweet scent. A sharp knock at the door pulls us apart.

“Darling! Darling, it’s time,” Gustav calls in. He flings the door open and enters, bearing a bowl of strawberries and cream. I stand and straighten. He pops a strawberry in my mouth and then fusses around my dress. “Don’t get berry juice on the satin, darling!” he says when I bit into the plump fruit. “I’ve seen that man of yours, and you’ll need your strength!” I know he’s right. I’ve barely been able to eat all day; my stomach is filled with nervous butterflies.

“We’re ready for you outside,” he says. “There was a teeny delay – nothing to be concerned about...” I have Nika by the hand, and we’re sweeping through the door. The lush gardens hosting our ceremony are emerald green...and glittering with raindrops. “We had a little downpour, darling! I had to remove all the chairs and bring them back again!” Gustav admits laughingly. “It’s good luck, you know. A rain shower on your wedding day!”

Before us, the scene looks like a small piece of paradise. Ancient rose bushes are drooping heavily with fragrant white blooms. A carpet of white petals has been strewn up a path between two panels of gold tiffany chairs. And at the end of it all, beneath a rose bower, are the broad shoulders of the gorgeous man I’m about to bind my heart to.

Gustav waves a hand, and violins begin playing. I’m pretty sure it’s *A Kiss From a Rose*, but at this point, I’m in a little pink bubble of happiness. I barely hear anything aside from my own heartbeat. I squeeze Nika’s hand, and she smiles up at me just as everyone turns to look at us. There’s a ripple of murmurs as we step onto the petals. Timur turns, and our eyes meet, and suddenly there’s no one else in my world.

I reach his side and feel shyness overwhelm me.
“You’re beautiful,” he says huskily as I look up into his face.

“So are you,” I murmur back, and he shakes his head and grins. The next minutes pass in a blur. I know I say, “I do.” The words would come out a thousand times without me having to think about them.

Then he has my hand in his. “For the pieces that fit together,” he whispers as he slides an engraved platinum band down my finger. It joins the glittering solitaire diamond already there. “I love you so much,” he adds.

Needless to say, I’m choking on tears.

When the minister announces that Timur may kiss his bride, I’m swept off my feet like a giddy teenage girl. There’s a rowdy round of applause, and when he sets me down, I turn sheepishly. For the first time, I see the gathering of people who have joined us this day. In the front row are Gregori Gusev and Giselle Green – who I’ve come to learn is really named Nadia.

Beyond them, among a sizeable gathering of guests, are at least a dozen uniformed men. Timur’s former brothers-in-arms. There’s a tense history there, but the story has slowly been unfolding.

As we make our way back down the aisle, I grin at the friendly ribbing he receives. It's certainly less raucous than the comments from my side. I've forgiven Becky for letting out my room. She'd given Timur his first reason for asking me to stay with him, after all. She's arrived with some of the girls from the club, and they're already eyeing out his compatriots. I suspect there are going to be some colorful stories told about our wedding. Which is as it should be.

Every great romance begins with a colorful story.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Kayla

Ten Months Later

The doorbell rings and I struggle to get my eyes open.

Every minute of sleep has become precious since Daniil arrived. Not that I mind a moment of it.

It rings again, and I groan as I push myself up into a sitting position. By the third ring, I'm on my feet with a sigh.

“Be quiet! The baby's sleeping,” Nika yells from somewhere in the house. Her sharp little voice is followed almost immediately by a loud wail announcing that my son is awake.

“*Malyshka*, it is you who just woke him. Hush. Mama is trying to rest.” It's Timur's voice now, deep and rumbling. The sound has something stirring in the pit of my belly and it makes me smile. After a year – which feels longer after all

we've been through – the man can still turn me on with just his voice.

Heavy footsteps move past my doorway and I hear the sound of the nursery door opening quietly. Daniil's wails come to a halt and I know that Timur has lifted him from his crib.

I pad across the room and open the interleading door from our bedroom. I emerge into the nursery in time to catch my husband cradling our son, crooning softly to him. He looks up at me and his brow furrows.

“You should be asleep. You had a long night,” he murmurs.

“And whose fault is that?” I feel my lips curl into a smile. I still ache in all the right ways. Our lovemaking is as passionate as it was in those early days. I think it always will be.

He grins back. “I'd like to blame Daniil, but I will admit that I had a small part to play in that.”

“A small part?” I've reached his side, and I slide my arm around his waist, nestling our infant between us. I dip my head and brush my lips against Daniil's downy head, inhaling his sweet baby scent.

“Papa!” The door flies open and Nika bursts in. “Tetya Nadia is here!”

“Nika!” I tut. “Did you open the door all by yourself?” All my protective instincts surge to the fore – I’ll never get over my need to watch over her. “You know what I told you about—”

But she’s shaking her head. “Karl went to see who was there. Tetya Nadia wants to speak to you and Papa.”

As we make our way down to the entrance hall, I gnaw on my lip, wondering what she has to say that can’t be discussed over the phone.

The woman I once knew as Giselle is every bit as chic and beautiful as I remember from those first days here. Except now there’s a warmth to her eyes as she smiles up at us.

“Well, look at you! So lovely!” Her voice is as warm as her eyes. And the French accent is completely gone, of course. Now she speaks with the rounded Russian vowels that I love so much about Timur’s way of speaking.

“We look the same as always, Nadia,” I laugh back.

“I was talking about my godson, Kayla.” Nadia has her arms outstretched, her fingers wiggling eagerly as she reaches

for Daniil. Timur hands him over and Nadia makes happy cooing sounds as she gazes down into my son's face.

“Did you come here just to play with my son, Nadia?” Timur asks. He winks as he says it, though Nadia can't see since she's still absorbed with the infant in her arms.

“Not entirely. Gregori wanted me to tell you that they found something.”

“Found something?” Timur cocks his head.

“A jacket with Vasiliy Koslov's wallet washed up onto the shore not far from the marina where his yacht had been moored.”

“You're kidding! After this all this time?” I stare at her in disbelief. It's been so many months that I've almost been able to put his existence behind me.

“Actually, a vagrant picked it up some time ago, it seems. He pinged the radar when he tried to use Koslov's credit card at a liquor store. Probably thought enough time had passed to be able to get away with it. We found him nearby and he came clean. Anyway, Gregori thought it would set your mind at ease.” Nadia shrugs.

“I would have been happier with a body,” Timur mutters.

“Koslov was fishfood a long time ago, my friend.” Nadia gives him a reassuring smile. “From what you told us, there is no way he survived a chest wound and then being swept out to sea.”

“Still—” Timur’s expression is stormy.

“He’s dead. Let’s leave it at that,” I interrupt him. The mention of that man still raises the hair on the back of my neck. I’ll admit that I’m not as bad as I once was. Ongoing therapy has helped me and Nika. But I doubt either of us will ever truly forget that time in our lives.

Timur’s eyes move over my face and I know he’s probably thinking the same thing. He turns back to Nadia. “You could have told us this over the phone.”

“You are saying I cannot simply come around for a visit?” She almost looks crestfallen, though I know the woman is made of sterner stuff.

“Of course you can!” I interrupt. “We love having you here. You know that.” I still need her to understand that I don’t harbor any resentment toward her. Whatever happened

between us was all for the greater good. Her time as Giselle – or Green – helped an operation that saved countless women and more from a lifetime of misery.

“Good.” She beams at me. “But Timur is right. There is something else. I brought something for you.” Still holding Danilil gently, she tilts her head toward the entrance hall table where a large manilla envelope is lying. “It’s confidential,” she adds. “Gregori asked me to deliver it personally.”

Timur and I exchange glances before I walk over and pick it up. From the weight of it, there’s not much inside, but when I see the stamp of the laboratory marked clearly on the back, it suddenly feels heavy.

“It’s from the DNA lab,” I say, realizing that my voice is suddenly hoarse.

Nadia nods. “I will give you some privacy,” she says quietly, then turns to Nika, who’s been hovering nearby. “Come, child. Take me to your playroom. I haven’t seen your new dollhouse.” The pair vanish up the stairs with Nadia still cradling Daniil possessively. The woman will make a great mother someday. But now Timur and I are left standing awkwardly.

“Well...” I start, before pinching my lips together and inhaling deeply through my nose. “This is it.” I’m suddenly consumed by nerves.

“Open it,” he says.

“You do it.” I extend the envelope over to him.

He shakes his head. “This is for you, *dushenka*. I’m not interested in what’s inside there.”

I feel my brow furrow. “You don’t want to know the results of the paternity test?”

Timur shakes his head. “I already know who that boy’s father is.”

My heart melts just a little. Still, it’s thundering as I tear open the flap and reach in for the sheet of paper inside. My fingers are trembling.

“Oh God...” I realize I’m whispering the words beneath my breath.

“You don’t have to do this, *moya lyubov’*,” Timur says from beside me.

“I do,” I tell him. I don’t understand why, because he’s made it so clear that Daniil is his son in every way that matters. But this is for me. “I need to know,” I whisper. I hate

myself for it, but somehow, the thought of carrying a trace of that monster into my world fills me with a sense of dread. Not that I could love my son any less. My life revolves around the small family we've created together. "I need to know," I repeat.

"Then I am here." Timur pulls me close and slides his arms around me. "I am always here." I feel the strength of his body pressed up against my back. He brushes his lips over the top of my head. And I believe him completely.

With shaking hands, I slide the single sheet from the envelope and run my eyes over the contents of the page. My heart is beating so hard I feel light-headed. As I read, the words fly around my head, slowly sinking in. Finally, I fold the page in half, slide it back into the envelope, and squeeze my eyes shut.

"You good?" Timur says from behind me, his arms a warm cocoon that I lean into.

I nod. And then I smile. "I'm good." My smile broadens. "I'm very, very good."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Timur

I stare at her, and she stares back at me.

I don't need her to say the words to know what the answer was. Daniil is my flesh and blood. But I've known since the moment I laid eyes on him that he was my son. I knew before, when she first told me she was pregnant that I would love him like my own. Everything about this woman is welcome in my world – her babies most of all, whether I sired them or not.

Still, I'm glad this makes her happy. She's looking at me like I hung the moon. Turning her to face me, I lift her chin up with the tip of my finger.

“Thank you,” I say.

“For what?”

“For bringing me so much joy, *dushenka*. For completing my world.” I'll never have enough words to tell her how she saved me.

“Oh, you crazy man!” Her eyes are moist as she laughs up at me. “You completed mine. Remember where I was when you found me? That life is so far behind me now, and it’s all thanks to you.”

I want to disagree. But maybe she’s right. Maybe we saved each other. Maybe we were meant to stumble onto each other in our own fucked up way. I don’t have the answer to that now. All I know is that I want her.

I’ll always want her.

Lifting her up, I hook my hands beneath her thighs and guide her legs around me.

“Timur!” she gasps, then groans when I bury my face in the crook of her neck and find the sensitive spot that always makes her moan in pleasure. “Ohhh...” She sighs out the sound and winds her arms around my neck.

“I need to be inside my beautiful wife,” I murmur against her skin.

“Timur!” She gives a husky laugh. “We’re in the entrance hall! Anyone could walk in.”

“We’ve fucked in this room before,” I remind her.

“That was different.” She tips her head back as I nip at her chin. But she’s right. That moment was filled with anger. And now...now, I will never treat her like that again. I still hate myself for what happened back then. “Besides, we’re parents now. We have responsibilities.”

“We do,” I agree as I look around the room. There’s a living room nearby and I stride toward it, still clasping her against me. “But I am your husband, too. And that also brings responsibilities.” I shove the door open with my foot, then kick it closed behind us.

“Really? And just what would those be?” Her voice is teasing. She’s clinging to me, though I’m sure she knows that I would never drop her.

“To give my wife as many orgasms as she can tolerate.” I set her on the back of a nearby sofa and spread her knees wider as I step between them. When I pull her dress up over her hips, she grins at me.

“You’d be amazed at how much I can tolerate.”

“We’ll see about that,” I tease back. I yank her panties aside and run my fingertip along her slit. Her eyes fly wide. “You’re so fucking wet for me,” I say against her mouth before going in for a kiss.

She groans low in her throat as I find the nub of her clit and then thrust my fingers inside her. Her pussy makes slick wet sounds as I finger her roughly. The hard friction is just the way she likes it. I love the way her body has become a familiar playground to me. I know where all her buttons are, and I press every one of them now.

She's mewling and writhing against me by the time I unbuckle my belt and fumble my fly free with one hand while working her sweet pussy with the other.

"Yes," she says hoarsely, her cheeks flushed and her eyes glazed with need. "Yes, I want you now!" She backs up her demand with eager hands that reach for my cock. It's my turn to groan when she guides the head along her wet slit and tilts her hips to take me in.

"Fuck..." The word comes from deep in my throat. "*Dushenka*...you will be the end of me."

Her small laugh is breathless. "Yeah, but what a way to go, huh?"

I answer with a thrust of my hips that has her crying out as I fill her with my throbbing flesh. Her heat leaves my head reeling. It has always been like this, and I'm sure it always

will be. The shock of pleasure that comes with being inside her constricts my chest and leaves my throat tight.

“*Blyad!*” When I moan, the sound is strangled. I’m already trembling with the need to come, but I hold it off because I want to take her with me.

“Fuck me,” she whispers into my ear as she winds her arms around my neck. “Fuck me like you always do. Like you can’t get enough.”

I manage a gruff laugh. “Woman, I will never get enough.” And it’s true. I love every inch of her flesh. Her lush tits, the full curves of her hips, the silvery lines that touch the sweet belly that carried our child. She’s a goddess to me.

“Then prove it.” She sinks her teeth into my earlobe and the sensation shoots straight to my cock. Gripping the soft flesh of her thighs, I slide out and thrust deep until she’s thrashing against me.

“God! Yes! Like that!” Her cries are restrained, and I know she’s trying to keep the sound down, but it’s not easy. I bury my face into her neck as my orgasm draws nearer, still pounding into her heat. Her chest is heaving against mine, and I hear the little hitch in her breath that always tells me that she’s close.

“Come for me, *moya lyubov*,” I urge her. I can feel I’m getting close to the edge, but I’ll be damned if I leave her behind. Thank fuck she doesn’t need more encouragement because her harsh cry of pleasure sounds out just as I feel my nuts tighten and then I’m flooding her with thick bursts of cum. It makes her channel even slicker, and it feels like I might drown in her wetness, but it would be the best way to drown.

Her breath is ragged and her face flushed when she pulls back and looks up at me. “That...was...incredible.” Her lips curve up. “It’s always...incredible.”

I nod, because it’s true. Reluctantly slipping out of her wet, silken grasp, I pull her panties back into place and then slide her dress back down her thighs. “That should give you something to think about for the rest of the day.” I wink at her.

She giggles, reaching to carefully tuck my cock away and pull up my zipper. “You always give me something to think about, my love.”

“That is as it should be. Because I love you.” I reach for her hand as she hops down off the back of the sofa. “And we have a whole lifetime of loving left to do.”

When she nods and smiles up at me, my heart melts.

How the fuck did an asshole like me got so damned
lucky?

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Timur

Six Months Later

The sun lounger on the patio overlooking the garden is the perfect place to conduct business. It allows me an unobscured view of my girls as I make my calls, and keep an eye on Daniil, who is exploring the sunny tiles around us on his hands and knees. The crawling phase is nerve-wracking.

“All set?” I say to Gusev as he finishes explaining the new assignment he’s been putting together.

“*Da*,” he replies. “We will have a bird in the air by 0800 hours,” he continues.

“Excellent,” I say. “The funds cleared this morning. I will have the transfers scheduled by tomorrow morning for the rest of the team.”

“Fine,” he answers. “Got some good men on board. It’s going to be a quick ‘in and out.’ The client should be

satisfied.”

I watch as Kayla and Nika play on the vast stretch of grass with a puppy. Riley, the retriever, is the latest addition to our family. Their laughter softens me, and when I continue my conversation, it registers in my voice.

“*Spasibo, bratok,*” I say. “I couldn’t have done this without you.” There’s a silence as he processes the words.

“It was a good opportunity,” he answers when the silence verges on being too long. “I’m also glad we could make this happen.”

After the mission to out Koslov and his trafficking ring, Gusev had admitted to me that he was ready for a change. When I suggested that we set up a high-risk extraction service, he’d jumped at the chance. Well, “jump” might not be a word in Gusev’s vocabulary, but he’d been positive. In the months that followed, we’ve run a string of successful – and profitable – operations. Mainly crisis management in hotspots, as well as security extractions of people in high-risk situations. It’s exciting work, sometimes in danger of teetering on the border of being labeled mercenaries. But I have Kayla to keep me honest – my True North. And Nika to remind me of what I nearly lost.

And my son to remind me of the future.

“I spoke to a mutual friend this morning,” Gusev is saying.

I pull my attention from where Kayla and Nika are spinning each other in dizzying circles. Their shrieks carry up to me on the breeze.

“Really?” I say. Somehow, *those* old friends don’t interest me anymore.

“Petya Sokolov – your brigadier from your Bratva days,” he goes on. I feel myself stiffen.

“What did he have to say for himself?” I ask cautiously.

“Nothing I didn’t already know,” my business partner responds. “That you’re a good man who got pulled into a bad team.”

I set my jaw. Bad or not, I’d fought alongside those men...until they asked things of me that my conscience couldn’t allow.

“Also said Koslov had spent years – and a small fortune – trying to get his hooks into that zone of the Congo. Gold mining,” he scoffs. “They would have drained him dry if we hadn’t put him out of his misery,” he chuckles. “Fucking

gangsters think a few generations of street smarts will teach them how to operate in Africa. It's a different world out there."

"*Da,*" I mutter. He's not telling me anything I don't know, but it's good to have it confirmed.

My time on the continent had taught me some hard lessons. The hardest of all had left me with nightmares that still plagued me. Less now that my nights are shared with a woman who's become my salvation. She's held me through enough of those dreams to know the story. And I'm not ashamed to let her do it.

The brigadier whom Gusev is talking about had been involved in the fiasco that saw me drop half a dozen men turned bad by greed. We'd been sent in to negotiate a contract with a local chief. It was little more than a cover to clear a peaceful village from a region rich with gold. The gold Vasilii Koslov had hoped to get his hands on.

Gusev had stood behind me then, though he never had all the facts. My role in the Bratva was permanently compromised — a man who would turn on his own brothers — but I'd do it again and face the same music. Although the dark eyes of the child I couldn't save will go with me to my grave.

I glance over at my own child. Daniil is gurgling as he grasps at fallen leaves with pudgy fingers, oblivious to the darkness that exists in the world around him. And if I have my way, that's how it will stay for as long as I can protect him.

I can hear Gregori continuing in the background of my wandering thoughts. It's not that his words aren't important, but they pale in comparison to what matters to me now. My wife, my children, the world I'm building for them.

For us.

"Papa!" Nika's cheerful voice snags my attention. "Papa, did you see us?" Bright and filled with life, she's breathless and pink-cheeked as she skips in front of me. Riley is scrambling at the edge of my lounge, determined to get on my lap. Right. That's not going to be okay for much longer. He'll weigh 60 pounds before long. Kayla's bare feet are slapping against the warm tiles as she laughingly runs to catch up with Nika.

"Of course, *malyshka*," I reply. "With moves like that, you'll be in the Boshoi before long." Nika giggles and Kayla joins in.

"Sounds like you're busy there, *bratok*," Gusev says. I'd almost forgotten he was still on the line. "Give my love to the

family. I'll let you know when we touch down.”

“Of course,” I reply just before the line goes dead.

Gusev's not one for goodbyes.

“Was that Gregori?” Kayla asks. She and Gusev are firm friends despite being as different as two humans could be. I give a nod and set my phone aside, patting the seat in front of me. She heads after Daniil and scoops him up into her arms, then sits on the spot between my raised knees and leans back against my chest. I brush my lips against her cheek, smiling as my son puts up a resistance, then gets distracted by a handful of my wife's lush hair.

Nika has squeezed herself onto the end of the sunlounger and is watching affectionately as Kayla tends to Daniil. She adores her brother, but she loves Kayla with an intensity that is almost surprising.

The pair are still slightly golden from the month we spent on the beach in Cancun – the honeymoon we had to delay after all the excitement of the debriefing following the Koslov operation, and then the arrival of Daniil. It may not be everyone's idea of the perfect honeymoon to bring along an infant and an eight-year-old child, but Kayla wouldn't have it any other way. Whatever she and Nika went through in

Vasiliy's clutches has left them with a bond that I'd be jealous of if I didn't love them so much.

"How's Gregori doing?" she asks, pulling my attention back to our conversation.

"He'll let me know when the next phase begins," I tell her.

I've been happy with the new arrangement with Gusev, although it's strange to be overseeing missions from a distance. There was a time when I wouldn't have been satisfied unless I was in the thick of it. It's a rush I no longer want. Nor would I inflict that on my family. The isolation. The uncertainty. Never knowing if I'd be home or not. I'll never do that to someone I love again. Tanya and I may not have been right for each other, but I'll always regret what I did to her while I was off chasing my demons.

Riley's decided he needs to be part of our cluster of happiness and is bouncing enthusiastically to get on board.

"Woah, Riley!" Nika chastises him. "We gotta take care of Mama now." I smile at the ease with which she uses the term. Nobody would think they weren't related by blood.

“We have to take care of Mama every day, *malyshka*,” I add, nibbling Kayla’s earlobe lightly. She shivers and squeezes my calf.

“Even more now, Papa,” Nika says firmly. “Mama’s baking.”

“Baking?” I frown. Kayla’s tilted her head slightly. Her lips are curving up.

“Yes. A baby bun,” Nika says brightly. “A brother or a sister is baking like a bun in an oven. But it’s actually Mama’s tummy, not a real oven. Ladies can do that, you know.”

Kayla giggles and I suck in a breath.

“Is she...?” I begin, then pause. I need a moment to comprehend her words. “Is she saying what I think she is?”

“Mm-hmm,” she murmurs and glances over her shoulder at me. “Is that...okay? I mean...we always wanted a big family.” She smiles again. “Is it okay?” she repeats.

“*Bozhe moy, dushenka...*” Fuck, my heart’s about to explode. I swallow hard. “Better than okay.” I tighten my arms around Kayla and tug her and Daniil closer against me. Nika manages to sandwich herself in on the action.

I'm overwhelmed with the urge to pull the whole damn lot of them right into my heart.

I think of my conversation with Gusev. Remembering how it might have once bothered me to be missing out on the excitement. How it might have bothered me to miss an opportunity to stamp my mark on the world. To prove how much of a man I can be.

That all seems so senseless now. The bravado. The constant search for meaning. This is where meaning lies. In my small – but growing – family.

“I love you,” Kayla says softly. It still swells my chest every time she says the words.

“I love you more,” I smile and rub my cheek against hers. All the pieces of the puzzle have finally fallen into place.

And I have everything I need, right here in my arms.

THE END

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**I accidentally spent the night with a Bratva Assassin.
The next day he kidnapped me.
And put a baby in my belly.**

My rock bottom is a warm beer in a smelly country bar, an
empty wallet, and nowhere to sleep.
A few days ago, I made a terrible mistake.
I stole something, valuable.
From very bad people.

And now they're here, armed to the teeth, about to put me out
of my misery.
Except they don't.
Because an unexpected stranger swoops in out of nowhere and
saves me.

Anton Ulianov.

Six and a half feet of broodiness, arrogant as hell, he's the
dictionary definition of "D.A.N.G.E.R."

And he takes out my attackers like he's taking out trash.

One thing leads to another and I end up in his bed.

Having the best damn night of my life.

Craving things that make my cheeks burn.

Doing things I'd never admit.

The next morning, he's gone.

THE END.

Or so I thought.

What I didn't know is that a day later, I'll be in his house,
locked in a gilded cage.

Or that a month later, I'll be staring at two lines on a
pregnancy test.

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A Note From Lisa

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