



Midnight
PURGATORY

BUGROV BRATVA BOOK ONE

NICOLE FOX

MIDNIGHT PURGATORY

BUGROV BRATVA

BOOK 1

NICOLE FOX

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MIDNIGHT PURGATORY

My gorgeous neighbor just found my box of “personal toys.”

And my mission to steal them back...

Ended in his bed.

It was supposed to be a joke:

Give my best friend raunchy toys for her bridal shower and embarrass her in front of her family.

But when my package is wrongly delivered to my gorgeous, mysterious neighbor,

I’m the one who ends up mortified.

I sneak over to his place to try stealing it back before he finds it.

The problem is, I get caught mid-heist...

And then he makes me stay for dinner.

Dinner leads to dessert and dessert leads to... other dessert, if you get my drift.

Several courses of sweet, sinful temptation.

In my defense, he’s even more gorgeous up close than he is from my bedroom window.

When I finally get back home the next morning, I open my stolen prize.

But it seems I grabbed the wrong package.

And the violent mess I find inside will change my life forever.

Turns out my hot neighbor is a Russian Bratva boss, with some deep, dark secrets.

Turns out he got me pregnant, too.

Midnight Purgatory is Book 1 of the Bugrov Bratva duet. Uri and Alyssa's story continues in Book 2 of the Bugrov Bratva duet, MIDNIGHT SANCTUARY.

ALYSSA

There comes a time in every young woman's life when she finds herself in something of a sticky situation.

This is my time.

I'm hanging by my fingertips halfway up the fence that separates my backyard from the backyard of my gorgeous, billionaire neighbor. Normally, that seems like a solvable kind of problem, right? *Just finish climbing over the fence, you silly goose.*

An important detail here is that, by some cruel whim of the universe, my leggings have just caught on a protruding nail and ripped wide open. That pesky little snag is doing two things: one, pinning me in place; and two, revealing to any soul who might happen to walk by that yes, I am wearing a hideously worn-thin pair of granny panties, and yes, they do in fact feature Garfield with a mouth full of lasagna saying *I Hate Mondays*. The fact that it's Thursday only makes it that much worse.

There are other problems, too.

Such as the fact that the box of my newly-purchased sex toys I came here to steal back from my neighbor is currently lying on the ground at my feet, *juuuust* out of reach.

Such as the fact that I'm technically trespassing here and, if the rumors are to be believed, my neighbor is exactly the kind of violently litigious tech tycoon with questionable mob affiliation rumors who will haul my ass straight to court if he catches me.

And, last but not least, such as the fact that said neighbor is currently crossing his lawn toward me right now.

Think, Alyssa. Think. What would Ziva do?

I cringe as soon as the thought crosses my mind. Ziva would never be in this situation in the first place. But Ziva isn't here to bail me out of it, either.

Neither is my best friend Elle, who is the person who's really to blame for all this mess.

Well, sort of. See, technically, they're not *my* sex toys I came here to retrieve. The box of dildos and the like from *Eve's Garden* is a gag gift—no pun intended—for Elle's upcoming bridal shower.

Just thinking about the contents is enough to make my cheeks go red. I've checked the receipt about a thousand times since I finally dared to place the order, so I know the contents by heart. It contains the following:

- One (1) pair of handcuffs lined with glittery pink fur
- Four (4) leather limb restraints (two each for the wrists and ankles) that apparently fasten to some sort of steel ring at the lower back and leave the wearer trussed up and exposed like a Thanksgiving turkey (basting sold separately)
- Six (6) different varieties of flavored lube with cringeworthy suggestive names—crème brû-labia, very-berry-pop-my-cherry, and so on and so forth.

And the pièce de résistance:

- One (1) purple alien tentacle dildo, complete with a suction cup and knotty, weird-looking flanges that make my thighs press together at the mere thought of those things going inside of me.

It's been two weeks since I ordered this *My First Sex Dungeon* starter kit. I've spent that time alternating back and forth between morbid terror at the whole idea and laughing hysterically at the thought of Elle opening it up in front of every female member of her entire extended family.

If that sounds cruel... well, she deserves it. Ever since we met in elementary school and she came up with the nickname *Shylyssa* for me, Elle has made it her life's mission to see me blush as often as possible.

But she gets away with it all because I really do love her and she really does love me. And when everything happened with Ziva, Elle was there for me when I needed it.

She's not here for me when I need her now, though. In fact, all of Los Angeles seems to be holding its breath, like the whole damn city is thinking, *How's this dummy gonna get herself out of this debacle?*

Excellent question.

I wish I had an answer.

Because the silhouette that can only belong to one man keeps advancing.

It's taking a long time for him to reach me because it's an absurdly big property. I sure as hell don't belong anywhere on it. It's only by some weird quirk of zoning laws and the chaotic urban sprawl of Los Angeles that my two-bedroom bungalow abuts Mr. Uri Bugrov's sprawling three-acre estate on one tiny little side.

My house literally sits in the shadow of his mansion. But I've got a window from my reading nook that gives me a direct line of sight to his front door. That's how I recognize his silhouette—because I've seen it night after night after night.

It's always the same ritual. Like clockwork, at 9:00 P.M., Uri Bugrov arrives back home in one of his sleek and no doubt ridiculously expensive luxury cars. Some inevitably stunning woman with Jessica Rabbit curves you could see from outer space gets out with him. They go inside. They do (I assume) the kinds of naked, horizontal things that adult women do with men as jaw-droppingly gorgeous and wealthy as Uri. Then they re-emerge, Uri puts the woman in a cab, and she disappears, never to be seen again.

It's not weird that lots of beautiful women want to sleep with Uri. He's rich, he's famous—well, *infamous*—and he is very,

very easy on the eyes.

What's weird is how *jealous* I feel sometimes of those women.

I've had sex before, though only a handful of times. The whole dog-and-pony show makes me nervous, if I'm being honest. It's so intimate. People in your space. Breathing your breath. Sweating your sweat.

Er, no thanks.

A therapist I saw for a bit after Ziva suggested that I might have "intimacy issues." I laughed and said, "No, I don't have intimacy issues—I just don't want anyone close to me ever because if I open up to someone then they might just die and leave me and I can't bear the thought of that happening, so I shut myself off to the world before the world can inflict any more cruelty on me."

Come to think of it, she might've been onto something.

The silhouette grows closer. Ten seconds or less to impact.

An hour ago, life was just peachy. I was refreshing the Eve's Garden shipment tracking info again and again. ***Three stops away. Two stops away. You are the next stop.*** I waited for the doorbell to ring, but...

Nothing.

No knock, no doorbell ring, and, when I went downstairs to check the stoop, no discreetly wrapped package of purple alien dildos.

But as I glanced up, I saw in horror that the mailman was walking up the drive to Uri's mansion—*with my package tucked under his arm.*

I should've done something then. Screamed, tackled him, maybe even sniped him from my roof with a bow and arrow. Instead, I just stood stupidly in place and watched as the mailman set the package down on Uri's front step. Then he walked back down to his van, got in, and drove away.

After that, I started panic-dialing any post office phone number that might be useful so they could send in the Postal Service S.W.A.T. team to rescue the goods. But I kept getting

bounced around from call center to call center. No one could help.

The end result was that my package was still marooned at the Bugrov estate and I had only one way of getting it back.

Going to do it myself.

But that thought made me want to curl up under my bed and never come out. Giving the gift to Elle was gonna be humiliating enough. Marching up to Uri's massive front door and demanding the blue-eyed titan who lives there to, *ahem, hand me back over my giant purple alien dildo, please?*

That's asking for death by embarrassment.

What other choice did I have, though? I tried telling myself that Uri or his housekeeper would just throw it out. That I could just order a replacement and forget all about this embarrassing little *oopsie-daisy*. But none of that calmed me.

The most painful part was that I could still see it sitting on his front stoop. *Right freaking there.* That was when my worst idea came to life. If I waited for nightfall, maybe I could sneak over the fence and steal it back without anyone being the wiser...

Somehow, of all my plans, that was the one that won out.

I told myself I'd be fast. In and out like a ninja. I even changed into all black clothes so I didn't raise any eyebrows.

"It's all gonna be fine," I whispered to myself just before I stepped out into my backyard. "In and out like a ninja. In and out like a ninja."

If Ziva could've seen me then, she'd have busted her gut laughing. I glanced over at her picture sitting on the mantel. A photo of the two of us at high school graduation. The Walsh twins, both of us in matching mauve dresses with matching seventeen-year-old smiles.

Mine hasn't changed much over the years.

But hers is frozen like that forever.

I ripped my gaze away. I needed to focus. Eye of the tiger time.

At first, everything went well. I hopped the fence like I was on *American Ninja Warrior: Sex Toy Exfiltration Edition*.

Darted up to Uri's stoop.

Picked up my package and high-tailed it back to the fence, tossed it over into my backyard, started the climb myself...

Then: disaster struck.

The nail struck, more specifically. It sliced open my thigh and pinned me in place. Garfield came out to say hello.

And now, the man of the hour is here to ask me one very reasonable question.

“What the hell are you doing on my property?”

URI

There's a half-naked girl hanging from my fence.

I pause a few feet away from her and stop to survey the scene. She's dangling helplessly. One hand on the top of the boards, so close to freedom and yet so very fucking far away. There's some kind of orange cartoon cat printed on her ass. The tattered material of her leggings flaps in the wind.

She doesn't *look* like any assassin who's ever tried to kill me before.

But there's a first time for everything, so I keep my distance for now.

"What the hell are you doing on my property?" I snarl.

She flops where she's hanging, enough for the curtain of hair to flow back from her face. I vaguely recognize her as the girl who lives next door, in that little shack the city zoning board refused to let me bulldoze.

"Most people would offer a girl some help down," she gasps. She kicks again and sucks in a sharp wince.

My eyes track downward to see blood on her skin. There's a loose nail responsible for cutting her open. She needs medical care and a tetanus shot.

But she chose the wrong property to trespass on if she wants a Good fucking Samaritan.

"That's not an answer to my question."

"I'm—" She coughs and winces again. "Can't breathe..."

My God. If she is in fact one of Boris Sobakin's hired killers, like I first suspected she was, then she's his most pathetic attempt yet.

It'd be easy to leave her here. My security will come to do what they've been trained to do with thieves and would-be criminals. She'd disappear forever. Hell, I might be able to finally raze her house to the ground.

But something stops me. Fuck if I know what that something is. Pity, maybe.

Or maybe it's the curve of her leg peeking off from beneath the ruined leggings. Maybe it's how depressing I find her washed-too-many-times, never-been-seen-by-a-lover panties. They tell a story of a life spent shying away from the gaze of men like me, men who dominate everything set in front of them. Maybe it's that I want to rip those things off and see if her pussy is as sweet and innocent as the rest of her.

"Pity" is the simplest explanation, though.

Rolling my eyes, I stride forward. I put two hands on her hips, lift her carefully away from the protruding nail, and set her down on her feet.

I ought to let her go once the job is done. But my hands stay plastered on her waist for a few seconds longer than they should. My eyes bore into hers. She's got light blue irises, almost translucent, cotton candy cerulean. Her lips are soft and bow-shaped and a tiny, scared breath passes between them as she looks up at me and swallows.

Too innocent by a fucking mile. I peel my hands from her hips and tuck them in my pockets where they belong. Just touching this girl is almost enough to ruin her. Entertaining my fantasies of shredding that orange cat underwear to pieces would absolutely do the trick.

"I'm not most people," I murmur.

She recoils and blinks in confusion. "What?"

"You said 'most people' would help you down. I'm not most people."

“Oh. Well, yeah. Duh. You live in a castle, for starters.”

I snort and glance back at my house over my shoulder. Compared to her tiny little hovel, it does have some castle-like qualities. “Envy is unbecoming,” I remark as I turn my gaze back on her.

The girl rolls her eyes. “Ah, the luxuries of being able to shit in a different bathroom every day of the week. Good to know it hasn’t gone to your head.”

“I was an egotistical bastard long before the house.”

She claps two sarcastic hands to her face. “It’s self-aware, too!” Then, gesturing vaguely at me, she adds, “Were you also an egotistical bastard before all this?”

I follow her gesture in confusion. I’m wearing my usual: charcoal Cesare Attolini suit, black Hermes tie, Tom Ford loafers as dark as my hair. The watch on my wrist reflects the rising moon. “Before all of what?”

“Don’t act like you don’t know you’re well-dressed and good-looking.”

“Don’t act like I’d be any different if I wasn’t.”

“My God, do you have a smooth retort for everything? It’s infuriating. I feel like you’re reading off a movie script.”

I shift in place as the breeze wafts her scent to my nose. A sweet, salty sweat and vanilla perfume. My cock stirs. “What happens next in this movie then?”

She crosses her arms over her chest. “We just established that you’re the one with the script. Why don’t you tell me?”

“Dinner,” I answer immediately. My response takes even me by surprise. I have to run a hand through my hair and bring myself back under control before I add, “You’re going to come sit at my table and explain to me what the fuck you were doing on my property.”

I watch intently as the girl swallows again. Her throat bobs nervously and she toys with a charm bracelet on her wrist. I don’t think she’s even aware she’s doing it. I glance down to

see a link with the letter “Z” embossed in rose gold as she twiddles it back and forth.

“I don’t think so,” she says at last. “It’s nice of you to offer, though.”

That pisses me off. People don’t tell me no. Not anymore. “It wasn’t an offer, *narushitel*. Let’s go. You’re coming with me.”

I start to turn away, but she stays stubbornly rooted in place. I pivot back in exasperation.

“My mom taught me a long time ago not to just go off into strange places with strange people,” she explains.

“And mine told me to shoot trespassers on sight. Whose mother should we listen to?”

Even in the moonlight, her face goes pale. I feel a twinge of something I don’t feel often: guilt. She looks terrified suddenly and I don’t blame her—my mother did tell me that, actually, and it was my first instinct when my security team informed me that someone had passed over the southwestern gate.

But shooting her would be a waste of a bullet. She’s no killer and she doesn’t know a damn thing about who I am or what kind of organization I lead. She’s just a shy, scared woman—albeit an irritatingly attractive one—and so interrogating her over dinner sounds like punishment enough.

Sighing, I point at her. “You just tore your thigh open on a rusty nail. You’re favoring your other leg, so I know it hurt worse than you’re willing to admit. I also know that there isn’t a fucking chance you have an extra tetanus shot lying next to the half-eaten salad and the moldy loaf of bread that are no doubt rotting in your refrigerator right now. I happen to have medical supplies aplenty. So do yourself a favor: stop being stubborn, come join me for dinner, and I’ll give you the medical care you need. Otherwise, you’re going to wake up with lockjaw, trespassing charges, and an ugly scar that’ll last you the rest of your life.”

She still doesn’t look convinced. So I stick out my hand. She flinches away before she realizes what I’m doing.

“I’m Uri Bugrov,” I tell her. “No longer a stranger.”

Delicately, she places her tiny hand in mine. “Alyssa Walsh.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Alyssa. Now, are you going to walk to my house or am I going to have to carry you?”

ALYSSA

I opt to walk.

One, because I don't want him to think I want him to carry me.

And two, because if he so much as tries, I'm gonna blush so bad that astronauts flying through space will be able to see my red cheeks. Uri will feel me radiating nuclear-level embarrassed heat and will assume the obvious: that I'm completely and utterly infatuated with him.

Which I'm most definitely not. Apart from having a healthy appreciation for his rock-hard physique and symmetrical bone structure, that is. I mean, physical attraction is only skin-deep, right? Practically meaningless.

I mean, sure, I have been known to ogle him in the past from the reading nook in my bedroom. But I ogle Henry Cavill, too. Doesn't mean I'm in love with him.

It's a long, silent trek across the lawn back to the mansion. He leads me inside without any sense of pride or even the slightest hint that he knows he lives in the fucking Taj Mahal of L.A. I do my best not to gawk as we pass by double-height floor-to-ceiling windows, dark oil paintings, and black leather couches big enough to hold everyone I've ever known.

The living room overlooks the garden, which can be seen through the massive bow windows that hug the curve of the room. A maid cleaning one of the nooks startles when she sees Uri, then blushes bright red.

Yeah, I feel ya, sis. Better you than me, though.

“Mariska, can you bring in the first aid kit, please?”

Hm—polite to his household staff. Didn’t expect that.

Then again, what *did* I expect? It’s not like I know everything about this man. But also, I’d be lying if I said I knew nothing about him.

I know he likes to entertain women. Mostly blondes with the superhuman proportions of a Kardashian. But it’s not the only piece of information I have.

I also know that he likes to toss around a football on the front grounds of his property with a younger man that looks too much like him to not be his brother. I still remember the first time I saw them playing. My head was first turned by the shirtless, sculpted perfection of Uri’s abs. But it stayed turned because of the way he interacted with his brother. Not the usual *no-nonsense, don’t fuck with me* vibes that he always exudes even from a hundred yards away. But something more relatable.

He looked like an average guy. Well, that is, if the average guy is over six feet tall with impeccable biceps, washboard abs, and a face that could make the angels weep. More to my point, he looked like a big brother having fun with his younger brother.

It reminded me of the way Ziva and I used to be with each other. Comfortable. Easy. Effortless.

It made me sad and envious and needy all at the same time. That was the real reason I was maybe slightly too interested in Uri Bugrov. That was the real reason I couldn’t totally hate him.

And maybe, just maybe, that was the reason I just accepted this invitation into his home.

Because I wanted to see if there’s a human behind the flawless mask.

“Sit.”

I obey before I even realize what I’m doing, taking a chair facing the windows. I scowl at my submissiveness, but it’s too

late to muster up some backbone, so I just sigh and sink into the seat. He wasn't wrong—my leg does hurt.

"You have a nice house," I remark.

He doesn't smile like most people do when people compliment their homes. He just nods apathetically. "I do."

"The humility is astounding."

"One of my finer qualities."

He's not looking at me. He's rummaging through a cabinet nearby. I clear my throat awkwardly as I look around in search of something to talk about. I'm not the greatest with tense silences. Or awkward silences. Or really, silences in general.

"You live alone?"

He frowns as though he finds my question offensive. "I have staff. Some of them live on the property."

"No family?"

Maybe the guy I've seen him play football with is not actually his brother. Maybe he's just a friend? A coworker? *Secret lover?*

Now, wouldn't *that* be a plot twist?

I glance around the room and notice that the maid, Mariska, left the door to the cabinet she was cleaning open. I can see a frame peeking out, half a photo, a few stoic faces.

"Is *that* your family?"

Before I know it, the cabinet door is slamming shut. Uri's blue eyes skewer me impatiently. "I don't talk about my family. Don't ask me about them again."

Whoa. What the hell was that?

Then again, I remember people asking me about Ziva right after the funeral. I told them all to fuck off. Coming from Shylyssa, those words had more bite than intended. But they got me what I wanted: solitude.

"Okay," I croak. "I won't."

His eyebrows arch like he's going to say something else. Then Mariska walks back into the living room with a hefty-looking first aid kit.

He takes it from her. "Thank you, Mariska. Take the evening off, please."

She gives him a self-conscious smile and backs out of the room. And all I can think is, *No, Mariska, don't leave me alone with him!*

Though I haven't yet decided if it's because I can't trust him... Or because I can't trust myself.

I glance down at the cut on my thigh. It's mostly stopped bleeding, but it does look like a pretty gnarly tear. Uri sits down on the carved, glass-topped coffee table in front of me and opens up the first-aid kit.

"Put your leg on my lap."

"Excuse me?" I nearly choke on my own tongue while he regards me with a raised eyebrow.

"Your leg," he says with emphasized slowness, like I'm stupid. "On my lap. Unless you'd like me to try bandaging you up from a distance."

I gulp. "Um, right. Yeah. Okay..."

Gingerly, I raise my leg and place it over his knee so that my foot dangles onto the coffee table behind him. The heat of his body soaks into my skin. He examines the wound for a prolonged few seconds before he takes a double handful of the fabric of my too-thin tights...

... and rips it apart like the Incredible Hulk.

"What do you think you're doing?" I balk as my leggings peel apart uselessly like wilted flower petals.

"I need to see the wound properly and the fabric is getting in my way. Plus, it's already destroyed, so I haven't done anything to you that you didn't do to yourself. Now, stop fussing and let me take care of this before it gets infected."

My jaw snaps shut but the heat spreading through me is no joke. I could really use a cold shower right about now.

For more reasons than one.

His fingers graze against my inner thigh and I draw in a breath. When he raises his eyes to mine, I find myself unable to look away.

Aaand cue the blushing. I'm disappointed in myself for not lasting that long. But I suppose it was a losing battle from the start.

"Y-you really don't have to do this," I blurt.

He doesn't raise his head from where his fingers are kneading at my skin. "You're in my house, pants ruined, with your thigh draped over my leg. We've come this far. No point in turning back now."

I look down and nod, hoping that he hasn't noticed the blush. Oh, who the hell am I kidding? Of course he's noticed. My usually pale skin goes from borderline anemic to blotchy sunburn in a matter of seconds. Subtle, it is not.

I stay silent while he cleans the wound with a cotton swab to remove the debris. For such a big, brutish man, he's meticulous and gentle.

"Dealt with a lot of bloody wounds in your lifetime?" I joke.

"Many. I don't usually stick around for the bandaging part, though."

"Ha-ha," I say awkwardly. "Bringing new meaning to the word 'ladykiller.'"

He doesn't so much as crack a smile. He does, however, keep cleaning my bloody thigh.

My heart rate rises so fast that my palms start to sweat. All those mob rumors came racing back into my head. It's not like they're that hard to believe. I mean, the man lives on a fenced compound bristling with every type of security known to man. It's beyond me now why I thought trespassing here was a good idea.

Uri pulls back suddenly and I jump in place. He freezes, turning his eyes on me. “You can relax. I’m just getting the disinfectant.”

I clear my throat. “Right. Of course. Knew that.”

He reaches into the kit and comes up with a bottle. “Are you scared of me, Alyssa?”

“Who, me?” A shiver runs up and down my spine. “No. Never.”

Uri smirks darkly. “You’ll have to do better than that if you want me to believe you. I can smell a lie a mile away.”

Is it just my imagination or has his grip tightened around my leg? Is this meant to be a threat? A power play? Am I a dead woman walking? Was my ladykiller joke a little too on the nose?

Stay calm, I tell myself. Don’t let him see that he’s getting to you.

“I might be a little scared. I mean, look at where you live. Look at *how* you live. It’s intimidating as hell. And yes, so are you—but if you smiled more, that might help.”

“What makes you think I’m trying to help?”

A stab of pain in my leg takes away whatever retort I was getting ready to deliver. I look down only to realize that he’s applying the disinfectant.

“A little warning would have been nice,” I snap.

“Pain rarely comes with a warning, *narushitel*.”

His hand brushes against my thigh and the heat rises up again. *Great, that’s just what I need. More heat to really kick up the sweating another notch.* He seems oblivious to the mental conflict raging in my head. Most people have an inbuilt fight or flight switch. Me? I have a flight or freeze switch. Tonight, it’s stuck on freeze.

I grit my teeth. “This is taking a while.”

“That’ll teach you to climb other people’s fences.”

I scowl. “There’s no reason for your fences to be that high. Or that sharp.”

“Considering a nosy neighbor tried to scale it tonight, I’m inclined to disagree.”

“I am not nosy!”

“Then why were you trying to scale my fence?”

There it is again—the freeze reaction. *Because I needed to retrieve my giant purple dildo, that’s why.*

“I... um...” *Just tell him the truth. It’s a simple enough fix.* “I just needed something.”

“No one takes anything from my estate unless they have my permission first.”

When he says it like that, it does sound stupid. I’m having a hard time remembering why I thought I was Jason freaking Bourne instead of just going to the gate and asking nicely like a normal person.

I’m the first one to break eye contact. “You know what? I don’t need the bandage, seriously. I can—”

“Stay still,” he growls. His voice is whip-sharp and my butt falls back into place instantly. “You will sit there until I say otherwise.”

I’m starting to wonder if maybe I should be panicking right now. I’m in a strange man’s house, at a strange man’s mercy. So what if he’s good-looking and rich? So what if he oozes this weirdly seductive dark charm that makes me shiver and sweat at the same time whenever he touches me? I bet plenty of serial killers are charismatic.

But Uri shows no signs of letting me go. He bandages up my thigh carefully, his eyebrows perched high on his brow the entire time. He looks pissed off—but then again, he’s looked like that since the second he sauntered up on me dangling from his fence.

The pain in my leg has reduced to a mild and entirely endurable sting. “Thank you,” I murmur softly.

“Oh, I wouldn’t thank me just yet.”

I swallow hard. Every time my heartbeat evens out, he says something to speed it back up again.

He waits a beat, then the corner of his mouth twitches up one degree. It’s the closest I’ve seen yet to a smile on him. He sets my foot down gingerly, then rises to his full height. “Come on. Dinner should be on the table by now.”

Is this really happening? Apparently, it is, because Uri stands up and starts walking out of the living room without even bothering to glance back. He’s that sure that I’ll follow him.

“Wait!” I protest, getting to my feet awkwardly.

He glances at me over his shoulder. “Yes?”

“I... I can’t have dinner here.”

“Why?”

A thousand obvious answers leap to the forefront of my mind. *Because you have mafia ties! A history of shady business deals! Crazy security, troubling rumors, a smile that makes my knees feel like limp spaghetti. Just take your pick.*

Ziva might have said as much to him.

But not Shylyssa.

“Because... well... look at me.” I really don’t know why I’m gesturing down to my thighs. That’s just what I need—more attention on my embarrassing state of undress.

His mouth twitches upward. “I’ve already seen the orange cat on your panties, Alyssa. Changing now won’t make me unsee it. Now, come.”

There’s so much authority in his voice that I feel like I don’t have a choice. One dinner won’t kill me, right?

I hope.

So I follow him to the dinner table, hoping to God that *I* don’t end up as the appetizer.

ALYSSA

It's official: dinner was a bad idea.

Watching Uri chew his food is strangely sensual. Even the way he picks up his wine glass and gives the ruby red liquid a confident whirl is sexy somehow.

The guys I've dated drank lukewarm Coors Light and burped between every sip. They ate Cheetos and frozen dinners, not foie gras and seared salmon.

It all puts one thing into glaring focus—I am way, way out of my depth here.

I have no idea how to talk to or deal with a man like Uri. He's just such a... grownup. And he's confident. And scary, although I can't exactly put my finger on how. Maybe it's all those rumors about his reputation swirling around in my head.

Mob ties and bad men striking corrupt deals in smoky backrooms.

Bodies stacked on bodies, gangland-style executions, bloody bones dissolving in vats of acid.

And money. Money coming out of every pore, every nook and cranny.

But the man just cleaned up my wound after I trespassed on his property. He can't be all that bad, right?

... Right?

The problem is mostly with me. I'm too hyper-aware of his nearness, the way he looks at me like I'm the only person that

exists. I wonder if he's even aware of what that stare of his does to people. Something tells me he knows very, very well.

"Well this is..." I fumble for words. "... not how I expected my night to go."

Uri's mouth twitches in that barely-there smile. "I could say the same."

"You must meet a lot of interesting people, living in a place like this. Not too many girls like me dropping in unannounced." I give a self-deprecating laugh.

"No one like you," he underscores simply. Something about his voice makes me meet his eyes. There's more sincerity there than I expect. It throws me off-balance.

The earnest moment stretches, neither of us looking away. Finally, Uri clears his throat. "Would you like some wine?"

"No thanks. I'm not really a wine drinker."

"What do you drink then?"

"Water, mostly."

He grimaces. "I'll give you a chance to think of a better answer."

I shrug. "Splurging a ton of money on expensive alcohol never really made sense to me. I prefer to spend my money on experiences."

His grimace remains as he pours me a glass of the same wine he's drinking. Once the bottle has been returned to its ice bucket, he hands me the glass.

"Drinking wine like this is an experience. Small sip first."

I take the glass and swirl the contents like I'd just seen him do. Except that my swirl is not nearly as confident or as graceful. In fact, I nearly paint the table in a wayward slosh of wine. I expect him to mock me or maybe simply throw me out on my ass, but he just keeps watching without saying a word.

"Right, okay. Um..." It's very distracting how intently he's observing me. "So I take a sip and then I... Wine drinkers sometimes spit out their wine, right?"

Is he smiling? He is. Good Lord. That's a deadly weapon. Between that and the stare, this man needs to be on an FBI watchlist somewhere.

“You strike me as the kind of girl who swallows.”

I promptly choke on nothing but air. The blush is spreading like wildfire now, so I bury my cough and the heat in my cheeks behind a sip. It's silky on my tongue. Fruity, dry, delicious.

“Good?” he asks, amused.

“Delicious.” But that might have more to do with him than the wine. “It's really nice. Tastes expensive.”

He smirks and licks his lips. “I don't put just anything into my mouth.”

He has to be doing this on purpose, right? The way his eyes glide over my face has my body tingling. I've never been so conscious of my own limbs before now.

I keep squirming in my seat, recognizing a sudden and undeniable throbbing between my legs. Is this what it means to be turned on? And just like that, I'm blushing all over again with the realization that I have somehow managed to go twenty-five freaking years thinking I was being turned on when I clearly wasn't anywhere in the same realm as this.

What's even more alarming is the stark change in demeanor. He's gone from low-key threatening to aggressively flirty in a matter of moments. There has to be a catch somewhere. If only I could see past those very kissable lips to figure out what that catch might be.

“You're good at this, aren't you?”

He raises his eyebrows. “Good at what?”

“Making women feel uncomfortable.”

He smiles. “I'm good at making women feel all sorts of things.”

“Oh, I'm sure. You've got tons of experience, so far as I can tell. That revolving door never stops.”

He looks amused now. One eyebrow is arched and his grin has turned lopsided. “You’ve been watching me.”

I suppress another blush and roll my eyes instead. “I mean, we’re neighbors. I’ve noticed Mrs. Heidegger’s routines, too, so don’t flatter yourself. And I like to read in the nights by my window while you’re walking your... ahem... ‘dates’ to their cabs.”

It’s unnerving how focused he is on me. I don’t think he’s looked away in the last few minutes. “More wine?” he says instead of responding to what I said.

I glance down only to discover that I’m almost done with my first glass. How the hell did that happen?

“Sure, why not?”

Why not? Why not?! I have so many reasons jumping around in my head that I’m not sure which one to focus on.

How about the fact that getting drunk on this man’s property is far from my best idea ever? How about the fact that, the more I drink, the more relaxed and more uninhibited I become? How about the fact that I’ve always been a lightweight when it comes to alcohol and that this is the worst time possible to be encouraging all the other dangerous temptations swirling around in my thoughts?

But when he fills my glass back up, I don’t stop him. We just clink our glasses together and I take another sip.

This is it, scolds the little nagging voice in my head. Last glass and then you’re taking your Garfield-wearing ass home.



I was wrong about one thing: it isn’t the last glass.

But I was right about another: it was a very, very bad idea to stay here.

I end up drinking three more before I finally start saying no to additional refills. It’s only now starting to dawn on me that this might have been his plan all along.

Lure the poor, unsuspecting neighbor girl into the house and ply her with pricey wine before going in for the kill. Boy, have I made it easy for him.

Right after the dessert plates are cleared away, I get to my feet. My head spins but I push through the dizziness. “I really should get, er, going... Thanks for dinner. And for the first-aid. It was really delicious.” *Wait, that’s not right.* “I mean, the food was delicious. The first-aid was... well, you know. I’ll just help you clear the table and then I’ll be on my way.”

Cringe. Why the hell can’t I stop talking? Is it maybe because he’s super close to me right now and the smell of scotch and cinnamon coming off him is giving me a major lady boner?

“What makes you think you can leave?”

When did Uri even stand up? How did he manage to get so close without me even noticing?

He’s staring down at me, not a trace of a smile on his face anymore. Those cheekbones really are something. So are his eyes.

“You’re not going to let me go?” I ask numbly. The shivers are back, rippling up and down my spine, leaving goosebumps and dread in their wake.

“Not without giving me something in return.” His tongue glides over his lips. “You know, you never answered my very first question. What were you doing on my property, *narushitel?*”

He’s got me trapped between his body and the dining room table. If I move back another inch, my ass will plop down directly on the table. I’m on the verge of telling him the truth when I think about the contents of my package. Do I really want to end this bizarre, otherworldly night talking about purple alien tentacle dildos?

No. No, I do not.

“I was just... taking a stroll.”

“A stroll?” He arches a brow and honest to God, I start to sweat. “In my fenced property?”

“Uh-huh.”

I don't sound in the least bit convincing. “Okay, so maybe not a stroll. It's a long, weird story, and you're probably not gonna believe a word of it, but I swear it's true. Basically, my best friend is getting married and I ordered a package of sex toys to surprise her with because she always embarrasses me—that's why she calls me Shylyssa—and I wanted to get her back, so I got the weirdest thing I could find, but it got sent to you instead and so I had to come get it back but I was too scared to ring the doorbell and so I was hopping the fence and I got caught and...” I lose steam halfway through my borderline incoherent rambling. In my defense, it's impossible to meet those eyes head-on and tell a logical story.

Uri raises his eyebrows and inches a little closer. He's emanating heat and that smell that makes my thoughts go haywire. It's not like I've got enough moisture going on downstairs; now, I'm sweating from head to toe.

“I see.” His eyes drop down my body. “Interesting underwear, by the way.”

I gulp. Surely the proximity between us is not socially acceptable. Unless we were gonna... you know. Which we're not. I mean, my self-esteem is not so low that I consider myself unattractive—but still, I've seen the women that Uri has paraded around for the last couple of years since he moved into the mansion next door. I'm guessing none of those women would be caught dead in Garfield underwear.

“Interesting, but confusing,” he adds.

I blink. “Which part is confusing?”

“The part where, every time I so much as look in your direction, I picture ripping them the fuck off you and devouring you until your legs shake and you come so prettily on my mouth.”

Oh.

My.

God.

They don't have a word for the blush I'm currently experiencing. It's like a nuclear shelling. Bombs going off along every inch of my skin.

"People don't say stuff like that in real life," I stammer.

He smirks and smolders. "I told you from the start, Miss Walsh—I'm not most people."

My head feels like it's about to explode. I mean yeah, he's been flirting with me all through dinner. But I just figured that was his style, you know? Player's gonna play, play, play, play and all that.

Unfortunately, I've underestimated the strength of this particular player's game. Because I'm pretty sure Garfield is gonna disintegrate if Uri keeps this up.

"I, um... I don't know what to say..." I admit stupidly. That's the truth, though—I have no response. No witty comebacks. No snappy retorts. I'm blaming the alcohol but I'm pretty sure it has more to do with those intense blue eyes of his.

He tilts his head. "I'm taking you up on your offer to help me clear the table."

It's my turn to be bamboozled, but my confusion is quickly resolved when Uri reaches past me and sweeps away the plates and cutlery with his forearm, sending it all crashing to the floor. Then he grabs me by the hips and hoists me right onto the empty space.

My heart rate is rising rapidly. It's partly pure panic and partly Uri's cock pushed up against my panties, which, as we've already established, are threadbare. Which means I can feel him.

All of him.

What is wrong with you, Alyssa? You don't want to be just another name on his list. A convenience fuck. A sex toy that he just uses and then discards.

Hell no. I'm no one's purple alien tentacle dildo.

His hands grip my hips a little tighter, drawing me into his warmth. "I'll say this one time and one time only: if you want

to leave right now, I won't stop you."

I meet his eyes. He looks dead serious. I'm pretty sure that if I told him I want to leave, he'd back right off and let me go. Which is what I want—right?

My head is saying *yes*.

My vagina is saying *fuck no*.

How long has it been since I've let her go wild? If I'm being completely honest, have I *ever* let her go wild? It's not like the men I've chosen have ever known how to draw my sex drive out of hiding.

But Uri... Uri seems like the kind of man who knows exactly what he's doing. Uri's the kind of man who makes me want to be the kind of woman who drinks expensive wine and wears expensive underwear and has wild, spontaneous sex on expensive dining room tables.

"Do you want to go home, Alyssa?"

He meets my gaze when he asks. And my pussy throbs loudly in answer, drowning all my doubts and leaving only the desire behind.

"No."

ALYSSA

I don't even have time to process what's happening before Uri pulls my lips to his and starts kissing me like I've never been kissed before. His lips are fire and I'm kindling and we're both melting.

When his tongue slips inside my mouth, I find myself grinding my pussy against his erection. Is he just gonna rip through my panties with his cock? Take out Garfield with one deep stab? Honestly, for as long as I've had this underwear, I doubt I'd even mourn.

The wildest place I've ever had sex was a single bed—on *top* of the covers. Risqué, I know. But now, here I am, spread on top of what is a very large, very antique dining table that was just moments ago piled high with gold-leaf-painted cutlery that's just been swept to the ground like it doesn't matter.

Uri's hands run up and down my body. He stops kissing me only long enough to peel my black t-shirt off. He tears off the ratty old sports bra beneath it as though it has personally offended him.

“Why are you hiding this body under those clothes?” he demands. “It's a fucking crime.”

When he says it like that, I'm inclined to agree. It's weirdly unsettling to be the focus of so much attention, especially attention like his, which keeps veering back and forth between terrifyingly violent and so obsessively worshipful that I almost want to cry.

His bare cock nuzzling against my bare pussy feels borderline debaucherous. But it also feels so damn good that I find myself thanking the heavens that my package was mistakenly delivered to this address instead of mine. This has to be fate intervening on my behalf.

The stars knew I needed a good—

“Fuuuuck!” I gasp as he thrusts inside me.

My eyes roll back into my head as I cling to his arms for dear life. God, are they muscly. I don’t think I’ve ever been with a man who could literally carry me without breaking a sweat. Although there’s plenty of sweat on my end of things.

There’s still that little nag, nag, nag in the back of my head that’s trying to remind me that I’m forgetting something important. But it’s very hard to concentrate when he’s pushing himself deeper and deeper inside of me.

And concentration is absolutely needed, because the man is *big*.

His teeth nip at my neck as I squirm against him. My nails must be tearing his back to ribbons, but he doesn’t complain. He just starts pumping.

“Yes,” I moan. “Yes, yes, yes... ahh...”

I’ve never been particularly vocal in bed—er, I mean, on dining room tables or whatever. But apparently, I wasn’t actually having sex before now. Because this feels so much different than anything I’ve ever experienced. It feels like I’m *flying*. Except I’m not scared of falling—because I know instinctively that if I fall, he’ll catch me.

It’s weird to have that much trust in a stranger. But he’s not a stranger, right? We shook hands. We broke bread. He bandaged me up when he could’ve had me arrested instead.

A bad guy wouldn’t do that, right?

An asshole wouldn’t do that, would he?

So I let myself disappear in him. And I let myself enjoy every minute of it. I surrender to spontaneity and lose myself in each thrust.

There are moments when it gets almost violent. Like when he swirls his tongue over my nipple and then bites down so hard that I scream. Like when he twists me around on the table, grabs a fistful of my hair and starts ramming his hips against mine from behind like he's trying to break me in. Like when he starts slapping my ass so brutally I'm equal parts afraid and excited by the thought that he's going to leave a permanent imprint on my skin.

But at no point during any of these moments do I try to stop him.

At no point during any of these moments do I feel unsafe.

Maybe that's why I have not one, not two, but three orgasms, each one on the heels of the last. And when I can't possibly come again, maybe that's why when he spins me back around and comes inside me with my legs clamped around his waist.

I don't feel used or taken advantage of. I don't feel ashamed or embarrassed.

I feel desired and powerful.

And extremely satisfied.

Of course, the post-sex haze lingers for mere seconds before reality sets back in and I realize that I'm drenched in my neighbor's cum and wearing only a pair of unwearable black tights.

I use one of the discarded napkins to wipe the sweat off my forehead before I grab my shirt and pull it on. "God, it's late. I... I should get going."

Uri doesn't try to stop me. In fact, he doesn't say a word or move a muscle. So I take the opportunity and retrace my footsteps back to the front door. I'm lucky it's dark because I manage to hide my total state of undress as I rush, cat burglar style, all the way back off his property and back to the safe zone of my decrepit little bungalow.

Is he watching me? It feels like he is.

Don't look back.

I get all the way up to my bedroom and collapse into my bed before it strikes me what that little nag, nag, nag in the back of my head was trying to tell me when we'd started to get all hot and heavy.

I just had dirty, steamy, aggressive, *unprotected* sex with my next-door neighbor, who may or may not be a mobster.

And just like that, I'm terrified again.

ALYSSA

Breathe, Alyssa.

I have a Plan A, which goes by the name of Plan B.

I've resolved to wake up bright and early tomorrow morning, drag my ass to the pharmacy, and correct my colossal fuck-up with that lifesaver of a pill. How on earth did I forget about *birth control*?

Well, I know how. Uri's blue eyes are magnetic fields that suck you in when you least expect it. They really don't give a girl much of a choice.

After I've hyperventilated myself into lightheadedness, I end up in the shower. I rinse off the blood, sweat, and cum (ain't that a cocktail) and change into a clean pair of jeans and a white tank top. Now that I'm feeling more put together, I also feel better equipped to deal with the situation.

No. There's no "situation." You'll get Plan B tomorrow. You'll take it. And that will be that.

Except that I also know what it's like to have my hot neighbor quite literally inside me.

How did I even end up at his house?

"Ah! My package!" I bolt out of my room and back towards the front door. I spot the package the moment I'm out of the house. It's lying in the grass, right where I tossed it over the fence hours and hours ago.

I grab it and take it back inside. Okay—no harm, no foul. I’ve recovered the package, Uri will never know, and I can embarrass Elle as planned. It’s all gonna be fine. Just a little unplanned sexcapade under my belt but hey, I’m willing to think of it as some much-needed therapy.

I walk the package into my kitchen and cut it open. I’m expecting the suspiciously light box to be stuffed to the brim with all manner of obscene and embarrassing items.

But... where’s the purple dildo? Where’s the lube? The handcuffs? The restraints?

All I’m faced with is a bunch of weird straw that seems to be hiding my purchases. I suppose when you spring for a purple dildo with tentacles, it’s all about the reveal.

I pull the straw out and reach inside the box for the flesh-colored item I can see peeking through the straw. Did they make a mistake and send me a normal dildo instead of a purple one? It was bad enough making those purchases the first time around. I am gonna be so freaking mad if I have to do it all over ag—

“AARRRGHH!”

The scream erupts out of me when I realize that what I have in the box isn’t a flesh-colored dildo—it’s actual flesh.

Actual *human* flesh.

It’s a severed...

Fucking...

Finger.

“Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God.” I’m talking fast and shaking and despite my recent shower, I’m sweating all over again. “What the fuck? What the fuck? What the fuck?”

It can’t be. Maybe I saw wrong. Maybe it’s just a gag or something. That finger can’t be real. It must be plastic.

But there’s a smell emanating from the box that says the severed finger is anything but plastic. I grab my only pair of

tongs and use it to pull out the... yup, it's a finger. There's even a dry callus on its tip.

I nearly drop it as my dinner comes all the way up to my throat. Somehow, I manage to fight the urge long enough to tuck the finger back inside the straw bed. Then I rush to my bathroom and throw up my guts into the toilet.

Once my stomach is empty and the shaking has stopped, I work up the courage to go back into the kitchen. How is it possible to go from such a high—to *this*?

Violently, I grab the box that's still sitting on the kitchen counter. I'm gonna call that fucking company and give them a piece of my—

Oh, God. That's when I spot the name on the front of the box. Not Alyssa Walsh.

But Uri Bugrov.

In my fear of being caught, I must have grabbed the wrong package. Which means I've not only trespassed on Uri's private property, I've also *stolen* Uri's private property.

Apparently, all those rumors circulating about Uri are well-deserved because I know one thing for sure: normal people don't receive fingers in the mail.

I draw in a sharp breath when I realize something else—I just had sex with the kind of man who gets severed fingers in the mail.

I am so screwed.

“What do I do?” I ask myself out loud as I pace up and down the narrow galley kitchen. “What do I do?” I look down at the rose gold Z that dangles from my bracelet. “What would *you* do?”

Ziva would have been proactive about this. She wouldn't have just waited around for stuff to happen to her. She would have acted. Which is what I need to do.

I stare at my freezer. First things first, I need to get rid of that damn finger.

The only thing I can think to do is put it back in its box and throw it over the fence, back onto Uri's property. That way, I can wash my hands clean of this whole situation and pretend like it never happened... right?

I have a feeling it's not gonna be nearly that easy.

Of course, the other option is calling the police. But I have no idea who Uri Bugrov really is. Clearly. And I have no idea what he's capable of. Although seeing that finger has made it a little clearer.

Come on, Alyssa. Think.

While I'm thinking, I shove the box inside my freezer, because a nanosecond more of smelling that rotting flesh scent will make me combust.

When it's hidden out of sight, I can finally breathe again. For a split second, I consider calling Elle. But I nix that idea almost immediately. She's planning a wedding. She doesn't need to have me ruin her premarital bliss with talk of severed body parts and hot neighbors who might very well have mob affiliations that could come back to bite me in the ass.

This is why you don't go outside your comfort zone, Alyssa. You could end up touching body parts. And not in the good way. Well, not only in the good way...

"Think," I snap at myself, staring at the box on the counter. "Just—"

Knock-knock-knock.

I let out a mousy squeal. It looks like Lady Consequence has arrived to take her pound of flesh. There's no way that's not Uri. And there's no way he's showing up at my doorstep, minutes after we've said goodbye, simply because he can't get enough of my company.

This is something else.

This is about the finger in my freezer.

I drop the tongs in the trash with my heartbeat thudding in my throat and then make a slow, slow, agonizingly slow turn

towards the front door. Should I go answer it or should I just ignore it?

Knock-knock-knock. Whoever it is that's here does not have patience as one of their virtues.

"Fuck," I hiss under my breath.

I take another deep breath and head towards my front door, all the while hoping that, no matter what happens, I get to keep all my fingers where they are.

URI

She practically ran out of my house.

The plan was not to stand there and watch her go. But it was harder than I expected not to watch for peeks of Alyssa's skin amidst the torn flaps of her leggings.

I didn't know women like her still existed. That innocent? That feisty? A dying breed, for sure.

But she's just a few hundred yards away.

It's not the first time I've seen her, of course. It's just that she barely registered until tonight. Up until a few hours ago, Alyssa Walsh was nothing but a faceless neighbor with a boring life.

I wonder if she'd be better off if I still thought of her that way. The cat is out of the bag now—the orange cat, specifically—but there's almost no denying that her life, now that she's caught my eye, is about to get a hell of a lot more complicated.

When my phone rings, I pick it up without checking to see who's calling. I've still got the sounds of Alyssa's moans echoing through my head. "Yes?"

"Boss, you got a minute?"

I purse my lips. As my head of security, Ratimir may be stationed only a few meters away in the guard shack, but he isn't in the habit of making house calls. Which means something's up. I tell him to come over and a few seconds later, he passes by the bow windows on his way to the front door.

“What’s going on?” I ask when I meet him outside.

He clears his throat. “Sir, I was running routine checks on the day’s security footage when I noticed something in the feed.”

“Go on.”

“A white van appeared around 6:16 P.M. No plates. A package was thrown from the passenger side window right onto the property.”

I narrow my eyes. “It has to be Sobakin.”

“Gotta be, right?” he agrees. “The thing is, I had the boys comb through the gardens in search of this package and they came up empty. I looked myself and—nothing.”

I frown. “That makes no sense. It has to be on the grounds somewhere.”

“I’m not sure how, but this package seems to have disappeared into thin—”

“Wait,” I snap as my voice cuts through the air like a freshly sharpened blade. “Where was the package thrown?”

“Right by the southwestern wall, *pakhan*.”

I grit my teeth. *I fucking knew it.*

Alyssa was lying to me about the sex toys. The thought that she could be on Boris Sobakin’s payroll crosses my mind again. But with her wide-eyed innocence... I just can’t see it. No one’s *that* good an actress.

“I’ve arranged for another search—”

“Don’t bother. I know where it is.” I move past him and make a beeline for the shack cowering in the shadows of my mansion. My face sours as I charge toward it.

When I reach the stoop, I pound on Alyssa’s door and wait for her to answer. The lights are on inside, so she must be home. *A package.* The fuck is Sobakin throwing a package at my house for? And what role does Alyssa have to play in all this? Why would she steal it? Who is she working for?

I’ve heard the little *kiska* scream once.

Let's see how she screams under different circumstances.

Still no answer. I knock again. This time, a little louder, a little more insistent. I wonder if she's screening me out. This fly might be better caught with honey than with vinegar.

I send a quick text to Detective Vincent Imbroglio, one of my plants in the LAPD. *Need a favor at the little shack next to my place. Keep your uniform on.*

The message goes through right before Alyssa opens the door. She's changed into a tight pair of jeans and a white tank top. Her blonde hair flows down her shoulders, almost reaching her breasts, and those cerulean eyes of hers are wide and rippling with emotion.

Curiosity? Unease? Fear?

Only time will tell.

She doesn't exactly look happy to see me. "Hey," she replies uncertainly. "Is, uh, something wrong?"

I look past her into her cramped, messy living room. I'm not about to fuck up this extraction by going in guns blazing. *Honey, not vinegar.*

"First off, I want to apologize."

She flinches. "For what?"

"I might have forgotten my manners for a bit. I don't usually fuck my guests on the dining room table."

She goes pink instantly and the effect is... well, "adorable" is the only word for it. Her rosy cheeks in combination with that golden hair and those translucent blue irises are making me hard all over again.

Focus, asshole.

"Don't worry," she mumbles. "I'm not gonna be a problem."

That takes me off-guard. Of all the responses I'd been expecting, that certainly wasn't one. "Why would I worry?"

She arches an eyebrow, her eyes darting past me for a moment. "You're here to make sure I won't get all needy and clingy,

aren't you?" she asks. "You're worried that because I'm your neighbor, things will get messy. Am I right?"

She's more right than she knows.

But I'm still not a hundred percent sure that she knows anything. Maybe she has my package, but if she hasn't opened it yet, I can retrieve it and walk away from her with the situation contained.

"Something like that."

"Well, like I said, you don't have to worry about me. I may blush a lot, but I know how casual sex works and I know how men like you work, too. I don't have any expectations of you. I won't be knocking at your door tomorrow asking when you're buying me dinner and meeting my parents."

I step forward, right into her space. "You have no clue how this works, *narushitel*. You've never met a man like me before now." I see her cowering, so I tone it down ever so slightly. "Still, I'm glad to see we're on the same page."

"So—we're good?" She sounds hopeful. Her hand on the door is tightening, eager to close it in my face and bring this unexpected chapter of her life to a merciful close.

Not so fast, princess.

"Actually, no." When I say that, she freezes, the color on her cheeks shifting from blush pink to deep red. "The second reason I came over is to check on you."

She narrows her eyes. "Did you expect me to fall to pieces or something? Because I'm not gonna lie, you're very good at sex, but I'm not as much of a fragile, bitter spinstress as my Garfield panties might've made it appear."

The orange cat has a name. Who knew?

"There's been a spate of break-ins in the area and the cops just issued an alert that there was more suspicious activity around this neighborhood tonight. My security just informed me."

She recoils in surprise. She looks rattled but I suppose that's a natural response to hearing of suspicious activity in your

neighborhood. Especially if you're a single woman living on your own. I decide not to read too much into it...

Yet.

"Oh... Uh, okay. I-I should probably go check on Mrs. Heidegger."

I shake my head. "You shouldn't be walking around on your own at this time, Alyssa."

She opens her mouth to say something else, but then her eyes dart past me and she retreats backward into her foyer. "Wait... who's that?"

I turn to Vincent and feign unfamiliarity. His mustache twitches as he does the same. "Good evening, Officer," I greet. "Everything alright?"

"Good evening, Mr.—" Vincent makes a show of looking down at this phone before he looks back up at me. "—Bugrov?"

"That's right."

"Your home was broken into last night, am I correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

Vincent nods. "I'm here because we received a dispatch signal." He makes eye contact with Alyssa. "Apparently, there's been some suspicious activity around your house, too, ma'am."

Alyssa looks borderline panicked now. "S-suspicious activity... what does that mean?"

"It means that there are people skulking around this neighborhood looking for trouble. It's possible drugs are involved. You live alone, ma'am?"

Alyssa nods. "Yes."

"Mind if I take a look around the premises?"

"Inside the house?" she balks.

Hiding something in there, kiska? I wonder to myself. While Alyssa is focused on Vincent, I take out my phone and type a

quick text to Ratimir. *I'm at the front door of the shack. Go around back and break a window. I need a diversion.*

“No, ma'am. I'm just gonna do a quick search around your property so I can determine if there's been any attempted break-ins or movement around the house.”

She glances at me. “I haven't heard anything about this before tonight.”

“We don't want to alarm people unnecessarily, ma'am,” the detective explains, giving her a warm smile. “We like to handle these situations under the radar. There are a lot of older folks living in this neighborhood and we're always mindful of how we roll out information.”

“But Uri—I mean, Mr. Bugrov was informed tonight.”

She's definitely suspicious of something. But Vincent has credibility. I planted him in the L.A. police force years ago. I wasn't interested in finding a crooked cop and putting him on my payroll; I wanted someone who was already loyal to the Bugrov Bratva infiltrating the department.

Enter Vinny. With his deep brown eyes and dark blonde hair, he looks like a Ken doll in uniform. No one distrusts Ken.

“Mr. Bugrov has licensed security that we can communicate with directly. We—”

BOOM!

The sound of shattering glass has Alyssa jumping in place. She whirls around and her jaw drops when she realizes that it's coming from her house.

Vincent rips his gun out and makes a very convincing fake call for backup into his walkie-talkie before he turns to me urgently. “Get her to your house and keep her there, sir.” Then he darts around back to try and accost the “intruder.”

Alyssa is breathing hard and looking around as though the sky is going to cave in on us at any moment—which, conveniently enough, is exactly the headspace I want her in right now. It means that when I grab her hand and pull her towards my house, she doesn't put up a fight. She's a ragdoll in my arms.

She barely even speaks until we're inside and the door is closed.

I lead her into the living room, the same place where I'd bandaged up her leg what feels like a lifetime ago. "Are you okay?"

She shakes her head. "I... I think I'm in shock..."

"Sit. I'll go get you something warm to calm your nerves."

Leaving her on the couch, I walk down the hall into the kitchen that adjoins the dining room. Once I'm out of earshot, I call Vincent.

"Well?" I ask the moment he picks up.

"Ratimir and I are looking, but so far, there's nothing."

"No package?"

"Not yet. Ratimir is looking in her bedroom now." It's annoying how much that bothers me that Ratimir is in her bedroom and I haven't been. "We'll do a full sweep of the place and let you know if anything noteworthy pops up."

After I end the call, I brew a cup of tea and take it to Alyssa in the living room. She's not on the couch where I left her. She's pacing in front of the bow windows. The pacing stops abruptly the moment she sees me.

"Tea?" I offer without commenting on her obvious anxiety.

"Y-yes, thank you."

She accepts the teacup but she doesn't take a sip. Instead, she looks back out through the bow windows. "You had a break-in last night?"

"Why do you think I was so fast to catch you scaling my fence?" She frowns and glances down at her tea. But again, she doesn't so much as take a sip. "Drink. It'll calm you down."

Her frown gets deeper before it disappears altogether. She sits back down and brings the cup to her lips gingerly. But I'm pretty sure that, even though her lips touch the rim, she doesn't take a sip. She definitely doesn't swallow.

Suspicious.

My phone starts vibrating silently in my pocket. I check it subtly when she's looking out the window again.

VINCENT: *We've checked the whole house. There's no package.*

Fuck me. How can that be? I know she has it. There's no other explanation for her skittish behavior or the fact that it's disappeared into thin air over the only border of my property we happen to share.

"When do you think I'll be able to go back home?" she asks.

I get to my feet. "Stay put. I'll go see what's going on. I'm sure they have the situation under control."

Vincent and Ratimir are both waiting for me by the kitchen entrance. "Nothing?" I ask as I approach.

"We might have to do a more thorough sweep of the place," Ratimir says apologetically. "We need more time for that."

I nod. "I'll buy you more time." My gaze shifts from Ratimir to Vincent. "Or rather—Vincent will."

ALYSSA

I am shitting my pants right now.

Why did I think this would end any other way than this? When will I learn? Nothing good comes from casual sex. Or unadulterated lust. Or handsome, rich, tech tycoons who can move the earth with just one snap of their fingers.

I keep fiddling with the Z charm on my bracelet. Uri's eyes have gone to it a few times now which makes me think he's probably clocked onto how I only touch it when I'm nervous.

I make myself drop my hand back to my side, because more than anything right now, I need to play it cool. I need to stick to my story. And most of all, I need to be strong.

That means no more wine. Definitely no more ogling. And absolutely, under no circumstances can I afford to display any more weak knees every time Uri says or does something halfway decent.

Just to play it safe, I stare at nothing but the tea in front of me. I'm tempted to try it, for no other reason than I'm parched. But I'm nervous to, just in case it happens to be drugged or something. That sounds crazy at first blush, but then again, it sounds crazy to say there's a bloodied, severed finger in my freezer right now, too, and we all know that's true.

There's also a squadron of cops crawling over every inch of my house. That's heart-attack-inducing in its own right. What if they find it? What if I'm incriminated? What if I go to jail for a crime I didn't commit?

And all because I wanted to avoid being embarrassed in front of my hot neighbor.

Idiot.

“Alyssa.”

I jump a foot as Uri enters the room. This time, he’s not alone. The blonde cop who showed up at my door is with him. *Oh, God, is he here to arrest me?*

Uri fixes me with a piercing look. “Didn’t mean to startle you.”

“I-it’s fine... Officer? Is everything alright?”

The officer’s face is a carefully orchestrated mask of detached professionalism. “We accosted one intruder trying to escape your home, ma’am. Unfortunately, we believe he wasn’t alone. For the time being, I think it’s wise for you to stay put.”

My eyes go wide. I can see Uri in my periphery, burning a hole in the side of my face. “*Stay put? You mean... here?*”

The officer nods. “We can give you police protection for the night but I’m afraid that’s only a temporary solution. And to be honest, with departmental budgets being the way they are these days, we can’t spare men. My advice would be for you to stay somewhere safe and there’s nowhere safer than this property right here.”

“I don’t know about that. I managed to scale the fence earlier.”

The officer’s eyebrows rise imperceptibly and he turns to Uri with an expression that seems to read, *She tried to jump your fence and she still lives to tell the tale?*

Uri waves a gracious hand. “Of course Ms. Walsh will spend the night here. It’s no problem.”

“I beg to differ,” I blurt.

He turns toward me with a disappointed look that makes me feel like a disobedient child. “Alyssa, don’t be silly. This is a large house with plenty of guest bedrooms. Plus, I have twenty-four-hour security and a state of the art alarm system. Officer Imbrogio is right: this is the safest place for you.”

Yeah—then why don't I feel safe all of a sudden? I'm feeling a lot more like a cornered animal caught between a rock and a hard place.

But no good counterarguments are coming to mind and the officer seems impatient as it is. He claps his hands and nods. "Well! Glad we got that settled. If you don't mind me..."

Uri nods. "I'll walk you to the door, Officer."

Neither man looks my way as they leave the living room. Even though they've made all the decisions for me. The male species is consistent, you gotta give them that much.

I grab the tea, walk it over to the ficus in the corner of the room, and drain the cup into the painted cement pot. My mind is still racing. On the bright side? I wasn't arrested. On the downside—it looks like I'm having an impromptu sleepover with my hot neighbor.

Which means I need a game plan. It doesn't take long before one takes shape in my head. Turns out, it's pretty simple:

Step One: Stay calm.

Step Two: Act innocent.

Step Three: Lie if you have to.

Step Four: Flirt if you must.

Step Five: Do not, under any circumstances, look directly into his eyes!

I think I've got all my bases covered. With my five-step plan in place, I'm feeling a little more confident when Uri walks back into the room. Of course, one look at that smile of his and my confidence is gonna start to unravel just like my tights did.

Remember Step One, Alyssa. Stay calm. I touch my charm anyway, just for good luck. "Did the officer give you any additional information?" I ask. I'm proud to report that my voice doesn't even wobble or crack.

Uri is stone-faced. "They're surveilling the area now. He said he'd let me know if there are updates."

“You know, you don’t have to put me up. I can always go sleep at my friend’s place,” I suggest. “I don’t want to impose.”

He sits down next to me and crosses one leg over the other. “What kind of neighbor would I be if I didn’t offer you refuge when you need it?”

That would be really sweet if it weren’t for the fact that I’m pretty sure he has an agenda. It’s not like he’s running around door-to-door, offering Mrs. Heidegger and the other neighbors a safe haven. Then again, he hasn’t had sex with them, either.

At least, I don’t think he has. Though the thought of this behemoth of a man giving the moth-balling-smelling Mrs. Heidegger the dining room table treatment I got earlier tonight is pretty hilarious.

“Since you’re here, I can have my men bring you your package. It must be somewhere on the grounds.”

I do my best not to flinch. *Remember the plan.* “No need. You can keep it.”

“I’ve got my own toys.”

My gaze snaps to him so hard my neck pops. Pretty sure that the open gawking violates several stages of my five-step plan, but I’m having a wee bit of trouble concentrating on that right now. “Right. Of course. Silly me.”

He doesn’t seem to mind the silence that follows, but I start squirming after the first couple of seconds. Step One has thus far been a resounding failure.

“It really was for my friend,” I blurt. “The toys, I mean. They were for Elle. Not for me.”

Uri smirks. “It sounds like she and I would get along.”

“She’s getting married,” I snap before I can second-guess the impulse. “And even if she weren’t, you wouldn’t be her type.”

“She’s not my type, either,” he says with a casual shrug.

I frown. “How do you know that? You’ve never even met her.”

“She’s obviously the kind of woman who believes in marriage.” His irises have this weird kind of depth that makes me want to take a swim in them. “Marriage and I don’t mix.”

“Imagine my shock,” I say sarcastically. “You know, you may not be able to dodge that bullet forever. One day, one of those women you sleep with is gonna want more.”

“Seeing as how they never get a second date, I don’t see how that’s possible.”

My jaw drops. “Seriously? You’ve never been with the same woman twice?”

He looks remarkably comfortable sprawled out on the sofa next to me. “Never felt the need.” He throws me a flippant glance and my cheeks start firing up immediately. I don’t know why I even care. The man gets fingers in the freaking mail. I shouldn’t even *want* a second date with him.

I *don’t* want a second date with him.

“Maybe you have the right idea.”

His eyebrows drift upward. “You think so?”

I nod. “No one needs the drama. Or the pain. I’ve had like one relationship my entire life and I wasn’t anything close to happy in it.”

His lips purse. Why does he look irritated? Did he expect me to be sad that he wasn’t interested in fucking me again? Did he expect me to push back, disagree with him?

“Recent?”

“It ended three years ago. So not that recent, no.”

“Well, that explains the sex toys.”

I roll my eyes. “For the last time: They. Were. Not. For. Me!”

“Shame,” he says with a low chuckle. “It sounds like you need them a hell of a lot more than your friend does.”

I roll my eyes, even as my cheeks heat up yet again. I mean, he’s not wrong. Tonight is the first time I’ve had sex in over three years. Not that my Garfield panties weren’t a dead

giveaway. But even when I was having sex, it was underwhelming on the best of nights.

I'm on the verge of telling him that when I stop myself. Why? Why do I feel the need to share so much of my personal shit with him? It's not like he deserves it. It's not like he's even asking for it.

Just because you've watched him from your window doesn't mean you know the man.

"I'll let you in on a little secret, though," he adds, leaning in slightly. "It doesn't matter how many toys you use: they won't scratch the itch like a hot-blooded man will." His gaze is intense as he holds eye contact for one more hot second. Then he relents and eases back, flippant again. "But I suppose, if you're afraid to be hurt, they're the next best thing."

I recoil in irritation. "I'm not afraid to be hurt!"

"So you enjoy being lonely then, do you?"

I am on my feet faster than I've ever moved before. "Okay, let's get one thing straight here, buddy: just because we had sex on your dining room table does not mean you know me. It *definitely* doesn't give you the right to therapize me."

He just stays where he is, looking up at me with cool amusement. "Sounds like I hit a nerve."

I glower at him. "You think you're so different? What makes you think fucking a different girl every night is any different than staying away from relationships altogether? Just because you're surrounded by people all the time doesn't mean you're not lonely."

"Now, who's trying to therapize whom?"

"Am I wrong?"

Uri rises to his feet slowly, getting taller and taller until I have to crane my neck back just to look at him. His expression is unreadable, so I have no idea if I've hit a nerve or completely missed the mark. He crowds closer until his bulk and his scent is all I can take in. "I fuck because I want to fuck. End of story."

Is it possible that all that calm confidence is a mask? I decide to test the theory by hedging a little closer and glaring up at him as though the proximity doesn't bother me at all.

Sidenote: it totally does.

“Please. You think you're so complicated to figure out? Well, I've got news for you, Uri Bugrov: there's a reason you sleep with every woman only once.”

That finally gets a reaction out of him. His eyes narrow and his mouth pulls back in a dark scowl. “I'd stop right there if I were you, little one.”

I should be scared. But right now, the adrenaline is pumping and getting in the last word is higher on my priority list than self-preservation.

Step back. Mama's coming in hot!

“I may in fact stay away from men to keep myself from getting hurt—but you keep your revolving door turning in order to stop any woman from becoming more than just your bedwarmer. So if I'm terrified—so are you!”

Aaand... boom. Drop the mic.

Uri stares down at me, his jaw clenched and his irises pulsing with heat. It takes about thirty seconds for my sense of victory to subside. It takes another thirty seconds for my palms to start sweating.

What the hell am I doing? My five-step plan has flown right out the window. It's like I'm *asking* for my fingers to be cut off.

“Um... listen—”

“Are you hungry?”

The pivot is so sharp that I feel as though I have whiplash. “H-hungry?”

“Come.” He doesn't really give me much of a choice so I follow him into the kitchen. It's roughly the size of every house I've ever lived in put together.

“Jeez,” I mutter, turning on the spot to take it all in. “You can get lost in here.”

He’s already pulling out pots and pans and a large wooden chopping board. “How about a little light linguini with scallops?”

I raise my eyebrows as he starts opening up the fridge to grab an armful of ingredients. “Um, correct me if I’m wrong, but are *you* going to cook?”

“Didn’t think I lifted a finger around here, did you?” he accuses with an amused laugh.

Blech... again with the fingers.

“You did mention earlier that you are an egotistical bastard,” I remind him. I inch back out of his way as he starts to heat up pans and boil water. “In my experience, egotistical bastards find someone else to do the cooking for them.”

“I’ve told you twice now that I’m not most people,” he says in a dangerous growl. Then he smirks and the effect goes away, like clouds parting to reveal a rainbow. “I’m not most egotistical bastards, either.”

As if to prove his point, he pulls out a black apron emblazoned with a picture of a sausage speared on a fork. Beneath it, it reads, *My meat is a hundred percent going in your mouth today.*

I stifle a laugh that would’ve surely sounded insane if I’d let it loose into the real world. Safe to say I did *not* peg him for the kind of guy who would wear a funny apron.

“You’re blushing,” he observes.

“Yeah,” I mumble under my breath. “What else is new?”

But despite my better judgment, I find myself relaxing. He gets to work, sautéing, chopping, basting. It’s strangely thrilling. I’ve never been much of a chef myself, so I’ve always viewed cooking as something of a superpower.

He doesn’t ask me to do anything other than pass him things or keep time. He cooks in calm silence and I watch in nervous silence and somewhere in the middle of this very surreal night,

I realize that it's been ages since we last spoke to one another. As bizarre as it sounds, I'm okay with that. I don't feel uncomfortable or awkward or squirmy.

Strange things are happening.

I'm in awe when Uri finally sets a plate of pasta down in front of me. The scallops look plump and juicy, the linguine melt-in-your-mouth good. And as it turns out, both assessments are one hundred percent accurate.

"Jesus H. and all his friends," I gasp when I take my first mouthful. "You can *cook*."

He winks unsmilingly at me. "I'm not just a pretty face."

I can only shake my head in bewilderment. He's got me totally confused after only a few hours together. He's definitely no Boy Scout and I'm willing to bet that a healthy portion of the rumors I've heard about him are true. There's no smoke without fire, as they say.

But no man who can cook like this can be a cold-blooded killer. I mean, that just doesn't compute.

You're forgetting the finger in your fridge, wise one.

Sure, but it was sent to him. It's not like he has any control over the packages he receives... right?

Slippery slope, Alyssa. Slippery dang slope.

URI

I should just leave her where she is.

The sofa's perfectly comfortable. Alyssa doesn't need a bed. And yet, I find myself staring down at her, unable to leave her on the couch. And just as suddenly as I've decided that she must have a bed, I've also suddenly decided that I can't abide the thought of her in anyone else's bed but mine.

Which is how I find myself carrying her upstairs to my room.

When I mount the landing and pass through the door, I set her down on my feather-down mattress. She stirs and moans quietly until she finds a comfortable position. Then she lets out a deep sigh and now, it's my cock that's stirring. It gives me this weird sense of satisfaction seeing her in my space. That's not a thought I've had very often.

Or at all.

About any woman.

Ever.

And there have been a few. The little *narushitel* was right about one thing—the revolving door hasn't stopped in a long time. The question is, was she right about everything else, too?

There was a moment back there when I was caught between the heat of her body and the heat of her words. No one has ever held a mirror up to my face before and fought back.

It's enough to force me to amend my opinion of her. That's new, too. No woman has ever surprised me. No woman has

ever intrigued me. No woman has ever made me feel like a second meeting was necessary.

But this woman...

She fights fire with fire. Her words were sharp, direct, entirely too confident. Confident enough to make me wonder if her assessment of me was accurate.

I consider it for maybe three seconds before I decide...

Hell no. I fuck because I want to fuck.

End of story.

I should be halfway to her shack by now to tear the whole place apart in search of Sobakin's impromptu little gift. But for some reason, I can't stop looking at her. It's those goddamn jeans. They fit her like a second skin, same as her tank top. Her nipples pushing through the thin fabric show that she's not wearing a bra, either.

I snort to myself. If she was wearing a bra, there'd probably be a fucking cartoon dog on each cup. If there's one thing I've learned about Alyssa Walsh tonight, it's that she can't pick underwear to save her life.

The thought of her in black lace lingerie rises up in my mind. Towering heels, a corset to push those—

No. Not going there. I did not bring this innocent little irritant into my house under false pretenses just to stand by the bed and stare at her all night like some moony-eyed teenager.

I turn abruptly and head outside. Since she's sleeping in my bedroom, it's only fair that I go examine hers.

When I arrive, my men are already in her house, scoping the place out. Ratimir is in the living room, literally lifting up the couch to see what's hiding underneath it. As it turns out, the answer to that question is: years' worth of dust bunnies, cobwebs, and a fair amount of chocolate wrappers. Apparently, Alyssa has a thing for Snickers bars.

I make my way to her bedroom and find it thick with her honeysuckle scent. I breathe it in and walk around. By the looks of it, Alyssa has never met a clear surface that she didn't

hate. She's managed to fill this tiny room with endless sentimental bullshit. Pictures, knickknacks, handwritten notes. There's a chair lodged in on the right side of her bed where a bedside table should be. It faces the window, so I'm assuming this is her 'reading nook' and, wouldn't you know—it boasts a direct view of the southwest gardens as well as my front door.

An embroidered lampshade hangs over the chair and a footrest in the shape of a tiny gray elephant sits just in front of it. Shoved off to one side is a battered wooden chest. I root through it and find nothing but bed linens and towels. Scowling, I leave that aside and go investigate the dresser.

The first drawer I open is full of her underwear.

Leave no stone unturned, right?

I start rifling through it. I'm somewhat surprised to find that not all her underwear is of the sad and depressing variety. She's actually got a few sexy panties and thin, lacy bras in the mix. One lavender lace thong in particular has my cock perking up. It doesn't look like it gets out much, but at least this one doesn't still have a price tag on it like most of the others do.

What a fucking waste.

“Boss?”

“What is it?” I snap, shoving the drawer closed so that Ratimir doesn't see what I was looking at.

His eyebrows rise, but he's smart enough to keep his mouth shut. “Um, sir, just wanted to let you know that we found this back on your property a short while ago. It was taken in by one of the maids and left on your desk.”

I don't have to look at the name on the package to know who it belongs to. *Alyssa Walsh.*

“You're excused. Let me know the minute you find anything.”

Ratimir leaves the room and I stare at Alyssa's package. Then, with a sigh, I get to work. As I rip into the box, I tell myself that I'm just being thorough. I need to know that she ordered what she said she ordered. But even when I find the interior

box that reads *Eve's Garden: Pleasure of Every Variety* in curling white script, I don't stop. **"Pleasure of Every Variety"**—that could be anything, right? I need to be certain. So I tear into this one, too.

Is that a... dildo?

Except it's purple and looks like it came from an octopus, flanged and curved and spiked in every direction.

I'm so hard it hurts.

I pretend I don't notice my aching erection as I sort through the remaining contents. There are handcuffs, restraints, flavored lubes that I can't imagine Alyssa using.

Of course, the moment I think as much, my brain figures I've just issued it a challenge. Because suddenly, my head's spinning with images of Alyssa; her tight little body, wrapped in lace and leather, holding up one of the sex toys and gesturing for me to come closer.

Blyat'.

The whole point of this search is to find my package. Not to snoop through hers. Although I'm starting to see why she'd decided to go all *Mission: Impossible* on me in order to retrieve it. Sex toys are no big deal in my book—but after spending a couple of hours together, I can see why it might be a big deal in hers.

I put the toys back in their box, but like an addict, I go back to her underwear drawer.

I pull out the lavender panties I spied earlier and stuff them in my pocket. Just a little memento to mark the night. Not that I need one, what with her currently snoozing in my bed. But now that I've got a prize tucked away, it's easier to force myself downstairs and focus on business.

I duck into the kitchen and start opening drawers. Her cupboards are mostly filled with cereal, canned goods, mundane shit like that. Nothing that can spoil. There's a carton of skim milk in the fridge next to some fresh fruit and yogurt cups. And to my amusement, a half-eaten salad and a moldy loaf of bread.

Fucking nailed it, I think to myself with amusement.

I shut the door and go for the freezer compartment next. Nothing out of the ordinary here. I'm halfway to shutting it when—

Wait.

I look back inside. I'm staring at a box that definitely doesn't belong in the fridge. My pulse pounds in my temples. *Bingo.* This is it.

Pulling the package out, I register how light it is. If she'd thrown away the contents, why put an empty box in the freezer? Then I take a look inside.

Ah. Well—it's definitely not empty.

I set the box down and call the one person I know I can call for anything. "Niko." I can practically hear him grinding his teeth. He hates when people call him anything other than Nikolai.

"What?"

"There's a situation. I need you."

That's the thing about brotherly bonds: it doesn't matter how annoyed you get; it doesn't matter how many resentments you have. When you're called...

"I'm on my way," he says immediately.

You show up.

URI

Nikolai is standing by my front door when I walk up. “This better be good,” he says. “You know Lev will freak out if he wakes up and I’m not there.”

I roll my eyes. “I told you to replicate the basement at your place. That way, he’ll be more at ease when he sleeps over.”

“You want me to spend a fortune so that my French-inspired bedrooms can be remodeled to mimic that depressing basement?”

“That ‘depressing basement’ has a marble counter kitchenette, a king-sized bed, and built-in surround sound.”

“And no windows.”

“Lev doesn’t like the sun.”

Nikolai looks bored now. “He plays football with you in the yard. Pretty sure the sun’s around when that happens.”

“Football with me is the carrot I’m dangling to get him out of that basement.”

Nikolai sighs impatiently. “Why am I here at 3:00 A.M., little brother?”

Little brother. I needle him with “Niko” and he needles me with that title. On the face of it, it’s accurate. I am the younger brother—but I am also the *pakhan*. I’m *his pakhan*. And even though he stepped aside and accepted my ascension to the helm, there are moments when I’m pretty sure he regrets it.

I hand him the box. Nikolai takes one look at the stump of a finger inside and glances back up at me with raised eyebrows. “Gift from Sobakin?”

“Who else? It was thrown over the front gate from the passenger seat of a white van.”

Nikolai smirks darkly. “He’s really leaning into the whole supervillain thing.”

“I’m gonna need an ID on that finger.”

Nikolai nods. “I’ll get right on it.”

He’s getting ready to leave when I stop him. “We may have a bigger problem.”

He turns back to me slowly, his eyes narrowed. In broad strokes, I tell him about Alyssa, about how she scaled my fence, made the mistake of stealing the wrong package, and then made the bigger mistake of opening it. I omit the dining room table sex for now. It doesn’t seem relevant.

Nikolai’s scowl gets deeper and deeper. By the time I’m done, the corners of his mouth slope down toward his jawline. “Wait... are you telling me she’s sleeping in your bed right now?”

I shrug. “I needed her out of her house so that we could check it.”

“Fuck,” Nikolai snaps. “Fuck!”

I’m rolling my eyes inwardly. He’s always had a habit of overreacting to everything I do. It’s another subtle needle. *I would never have done that if I were pakhan.*

“The situation is contained,” I reply coolly.

He looks ready to tear his hair out of his scalp. “How? She’s clearly seen the fucking finger. A finger that most likely belongs to one of our *vors*.”

I’ve been trying not to think about that, because the solution to a civilian getting a peek at incriminating Bratva business is as simple as it is brutal.

She can’t talk if she’s dead.

“I have it under control,” I say instead. “She’s under my roof now.”

“And tomorrow?”

“Hadn’t thought that far.”

Nikolai grits his teeth. “Well, start thinking. Because Lev will be back tomorrow and Polly will be here for the weekend. You might be able to hide a couple of things from Lev—but Polly? Not so much.”

“I’ll deal with it.”

He takes a step towards me and points a finger in my face. “I don’t want this touching them. We made a pact to keep them far from all this shit, remember?”

I clench my jaw. “You think I don’t remember? I was the one who came up with the pact.”

Nikolai looks away from me but I can see his jaw tightening as he thinks. “I could try to convince Lev and Polly to stay with me for a little while.”

“It’ll never work. They’re both comfortable with me.” Nikolai’s eyes narrow. *Yeah, okay. Poor choice of words.* “What I mean is—”

“Of course they’re more comfortable at your house; they grew up here. But we need to push Lev’s boundaries, encourage him to step outside of his comfort zone.”

“I’ve done that by giving him a room upstairs in the main house.”

“You rarely make him use it.”

“Because he has fucking meltdowns if I push him too hard!” I growl. “I’m not gonna risk traumatizing him in the name of curing him. We both know that’s not gonna happen.”

Nikolai snaps his teeth together. “He’s been regressing recently and you know it. If we take it easy, he’s gonna backslide back into his cocoon phase.”

“I already said I’m handling it, *brat.*”

“Like you’re ‘handling’ your next door neighbor?” Nikolai asks with a skeptically arched eyebrow. “Tell me, little brother: how attractive is she?”

That’s the other thing about siblings—they know you all too well.

He chuckles when I don’t answer. “Petite? Blonde?” When I still don’t reply, he throws his hands up in disgust. “Whatever you do, do *not* sleep with her.”

I can’t help it; a snort of laughter bursts through my lips. “You’re several hours too late, brother.”

Niko’s eyes bug out. “Goddammit, Uri! Why can’t you keep it in your fucking pants for once?”

I shrug nonchalantly. “She was trespassing on my property. I needed to find out why.”

“And you couldn’t have just *asked* her?”

My grin gets wider. “That would have been a whole lot less fun.”

“You have a problem.”

Instantly, Alyssa’s accusing words pop into my head. I push them right back out. “I’ll deal with my little blonde problem and you deal with that finger.”

Nikolai nods but his eyes are fixed on me in warning. Sometimes, he looks so much like our father that it makes my skin crawl. “Don’t fuck her again.”

“You know my rule: I don’t do repeats.”

That much is easy to lie about. It’s true: I don’t do repeats...

For now.

“Do me a favor,” Niko draws. “Let me be there when you explain this rule of yours to Polly one day.”

I give him the middle finger. “Get off my property.”

Smirking, he starts sauntering back to his car. His house is less than a mile down the road, but he drove here in his vintage

Aston Martin. Nikolai always did have a hunger for the finer things.

I step into the house, making an on-the-spot decision about what to do with my unexpected houseguest. My options are limited. I can't let her go now that I know she's seen the finger. There's a chance she'll go to the cops and, despite my best efforts, not all of them are in my pocket just yet.

And even if I could scare her into silence, I have no idea how long that silence would hold. She might tell a friend one day. A *boyfriend*, even. It's strange how quickly my stomach sours at the thought of her with another man.

I don't fucking like it.

Grimacing, I ring up Svetlana. She's one of the live-in maids who's paid three times as much as the others because she's on call twenty-four-seven and she understands the meaning of discretion. It doesn't take her long to find me in the foyer.

"Sir?" She's still got sleep creases on the side of her face, but her eyes are bright and observant.

"I need you to change the linens in the basement. And while you're down there, tidy it up a bit, will you?"

She seems slightly confused but she doesn't ask questions. "Of course, sir. Right away."

"Oh, and make sure the household staff know that no one is allowed down into the basement after you're done cleaning in there."

She frowns. "Do you mean no one except Master Lev, sir?"

"I mean no one *including* Master Lev."

She blinks just once at the unexpected instructions, but she doesn't say anything else before nodding and heading towards the basement. Meanwhile, I go back up to my room. Alyssa is still sleeping soundly, completely unaware that she's about to become a much more permanent fixture here than she ever could have guessed.

She's going to get very feisty, very quickly when she figures that out.

It's too tempting to think of crawling into bed with her, letting my hands run over her body. She felt so good earlier, squirming beneath my fingers and clenching around my cock. But that would definitely violate my "no repeats" rule.

Of course, it would also prove her wrong—which is a justification that I like a little too much.

I should be thinking about moving her somewhere more removed. Fuck knows I have safehouses aplenty across the city, the country, the globe. And with Lev in the house, stashing Alyssa here is far too risky.

But I can't abide the thought of having her anywhere else.

I tell myself it's because I need to keep an eye on her, but the truth is not that simple. I just scratched the surface tonight. I've yet to figure this woman out and until I do, her blunder has given me the perfect excuse to keep her under my thumb.

She won't be staying forever. Nor do I want her to. But I can't escape the fact that I want her here *now*.

If only so that I can split her open further and figure out how she works.

ALYSSA

Why do I feel like I'm drowning?

It takes a minute before I register that my eyes are still closed and I'm caught between the sleeping world and the waking one.

"Ugh," I moan as I try to pry my eyelids open. I feel like I've been asleep for centuries, but they're still stubbornly heavy.

Next question: why is it so wet?

I peel my face from a mattress that feels like cotton candy and discover the embarrassingly large circle of drool I've been sleeping on. Well, that explains the wetness. I tuck a pillow over the puddle and straighten up.

Why is it so dark? Did I forget to draw my bedroom curtains last night? Maybe that's why it feels so stuffy in here...

Wait.

Where is "here," exactly?

The realization that I'm not actually in my own bed hits me like a ton of bricks to the head. I'm not in my own room.

So... where the hell am I?

I jerk out of the bed and look around, suddenly wide awake. I'm in a huge space with high, arching ceilings and yet I feel extremely claustrophobic. It doesn't take much to figure out why. There are no windows in this room. The only door looks like something out of a medieval castle and, try as I might, I can't seem to open it.

Where. Am. I?

And then it comes back to me like a slideshow, one image after another in quick succession.

The package.

The fence.

Garfield.

Uri Bugrov.

Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no.

The slideshow doesn't let up. My head is spinning and I'm dangerously close to falling but the memories are relentless.

Dinner. Sex on the table. A finger in my freezer. Uri again. The break-in. Scallops and an inappropriate apron.

Uri fucking Bugrov.

I look up at the ceiling as goosebumps erupt all over my body. Am I still in his mansion? Am I locked away somewhere deep and cold and dark so that no one can find me?

The finger. He knows I have his package. He knows I opened it. He—

The break-in. The cop from last night. *Alyssa! You fucking idiot!* It was all a ruse, a stupidly simple plan to get me out of the house so that he could search it. Of course. Why the hell hadn't I seen it before?

Because you were listening to your vagina instead of your brain, that's why.

"Breathe," I tell myself, scrambling for my phone. "Wasn't that one of the steps? Oh, no..."

I don't have my phone on me. I didn't have time to grab it last night before Uri pulled me out of my house and into his own.

"There has to be a way out of here," I mutter to the blank walls.

I try the door again. It still doesn't budge. So I resort to banging on it and screaming. Nobody hears me. Or if they do,

they ignore me. After minutes of screaming myself hoarse, I turn back to the basement and start nervously pacing around.

As it turns out, it's a bigger space than I first thought. I find a little nook filled with books and next to it, what looks like a makeshift fort fashioned out of sheets and throw pillows.

The fort throws me for a loop. What the hell is this place? Better yet... *whose place is it?*

I keep exploring in search of answers. There's a kitchenette separated from the main area by a half-wall. I note stickers pasted onto the white cabinets and a bunch of child's doodles on the walls here and there.

Crayons lie scattered on the floor outside the bathroom—which, to my dismay, is also windowless. More kids' stuff is strewn around. Video games, model airplanes. If I had to guess, I would say that this room belonged to a ten-year-old boy.

Except that it's more of a self-contained apartment than a room, which doesn't track. And again, it has no freaking windows!

After a good hour of searching, I'm forced to admit defeat. This place is airtight. Probably soundproof, too. Unless there's a hidden trap door somewhere, it looks like my ass is staying put.

Panic. Panic. Panic.

But apart from crying or screaming, I don't even have an outlet for the emotion that's raging around inside me. I wish I had my break-in-case-of-emergency Ben & Jerry's handy, but even if I was home, there's no way in hell I'd go anywhere near my freezer. Besides—I have zero appetite. The mere thought of food makes me want to throw up.

That sets off a little reminder in my head. *I'm supposed to be at the pharmacy right now, getting Plan B!*

Oh, fuck me sideways.

Plan A was Plan B. Plan B is... pray?

I guess so. Put my hands together, get on my knees, and pray to any deities who might be listening that I'm in no danger of getting pregnant. That's looking like my only option.

This just goes to show that some things really are too good to be true. Multi-orgasmic intercourse with a man who looks like he was designed by someone who's been listening to my wet dreams? Way, way too good to be true.

It's not that he's a bad guy—at least, I don't think. He's just a broken one. Deep down, there's a good human in there. But you can't see it until you peel back the layers, force him to open up. Yeah, that fear of intimacy theory that I'd thrown at him last night? I didn't just pull it out of my ass. I've spent months thinking about it, wondering what it might be like to be in Uri Bugrov's stratosphere.

Not just because he looked like sex incarnate.

But because, deep down, I feel the need to fix broken things.

As it turns out, some things, some people aren't fixable. And if you try, you end up broken yourself. Or, in my case—

Trapped in a basement with no windows.

URI

“Well? Any news?”

“I said I’d call you when there was news to share.” There’s a little static on the line, but not so much that I can’t hear Nikolai’s irritation.

“You’ve had twelve hours. Do you need me to find someone actually competent to do the job?”

I should’ve known better. What I call follow-ups, Niko calls micromanaging. What I call delegation, he calls control. When I say the sky is blue, he likes to say it’s green, solely because it pisses me the hell off.

“These are delicate matters. I have to be discreet. We don’t want everyone knowing that our *vors*’s body parts are showing up in the mail, do we?”

I suppress a sigh. “I called all the main men. Pavel and Igor are the only two that didn’t pick up.”

“Igor always picks up.”

“Exactly. I just need confirmation.”

“As I said, I’m on it.”

I hang up before I say something regrettable. Then again, if I did, it would be the first time in a long time. These days, I tend to tread lightly around Nikolai and his ego. Not simply because I took the title that was meant for him, but also because he is my elder brother. And he’s also a good one—at least, when he’s not busy feeling sorry for himself.

The shatter of breaking glass gets me on my feet and out of my office room in an instant. I find Lev in the upstairs living room, shaking his head in distress and hugging his knees tight to his chest. Svetlana is standing a few feet away, marooned in place by the shards of crystal littering the floor between her and Lev.

She pales when she sees me. “I-I’m sorry, sir,” she says quickly. “I didn’t mean to upset him. I was just—”

“It’s okay, Svetlana,” I say gently. “Just tell me what happened.”

Her hands are trembling badly and she keeps glancing over at Lev, who’s muttering fast under his breath.

“I told him he couldn’t go down to the basement and he... he got upset with me...”

There are tears shimmering in her eyes. I kick away some of the glass. “This was my mistake. I should have been the one to tell Lev.” The frown lines on her face reduce drastically. “Could you give us a moment?”

She nods quickly and jumps over the broken crystal. Her feet land on a few straddling shards and the crunch has Lev rocking back and forth even faster.

“Lev, *brat*,” I croon softly as I approach him. He’s skittish, his eyes veering up and down, up and down, again and again. “Can you come over here for a second?”

He shakes his head furiously. The rocking doesn’t stop. “I want... m-my basement.”

“That’s not gonna happen today, buddy.”

He lets out an angry wail and lunges up at me. The first time it happened, he literally knocked me off my feet, but after seven years, I’m prepared. I grab him before he can throw the full weight of his body on me. I wrap my arms around him and squeeze hard like a boa constrictor.

Lev snarls but I don’t let go. I don’t even loosen my grip. I just apply pressure until he stops struggling as much.

“Lev, take a deep breath.”

“I don’t want breath. I want my basement!”

Keeping one arm firmly placed across his chest, I stroke his hair with my free hand. It’s a very different experience now than it used to be. Even at twelve, Lev was a tall kid. But the years have turned him into a man. His muscles have grown, his strength has grown, his body has grown.

His mind, though, has stayed right where it was.

“I know you do, buddy, but not today, okay?”

“It’s my basement! I want my basement!”

“You have a room up here, Lev. I made it for you special. It’s got green curtains and a fish tank. Just like you wanted.”

“I want my basement!”

I lean away to prevent him from bursting my eardrums. “Lev, you’re not listening to me.”

“I don’t want to listen. I want—”

“—your basement. I know.”

He’s trying to rock back and forth again. His eyes are watery with tears. He’s still struggling but it’s half-hearted.

“Lev, please. Take a deep breath.”

“My fort. I want to be in my fort... The train is coming... My enemies are coming... I want...”

“There is no train, Lev. There are no enemies, either. I’ve taken care of all of them.”

Lev shakes his head. “My books... My games... My paints...”

His body has gone limp, which is how I know it’s safe to release him. His outbursts are abrupt, sometimes unpredictable, but they fade away as fast as they come. I turn him around slowly so that we’re face to face.

“You have books, games, and paint in your new room.”

His eyebrows are pulled together tight enough to erase any gap between them. His dark brown eyes zip past me, back to me, then past me again. “I don’t like the new room.”

“Tell me why.”

He makes a sound that comes from the back of his throat. It happens anytime he doesn't like something but he doesn't know how to express himself.

“Use your words. Tell me why.”

He shakes his head. “Not safe... too bright...”

I take both his hands and squeeze. “Who am I?”

Lev looks at me, his mouth dropping open. “My brother.”

“Your big brother,” I say with a nod. “And what is my most important job?”

Lev's frown slowly starts fading. “Me.”

I smile encouragingly. “That's right. Taking care of you is my most important job. Protecting you is my most important job. I would never do anything that wasn't good for you, Lev. You know that, right?”

His mouth twists like he's not sure whether to smile or cry. He looks down at our linked hands and takes that big breath I've been trying to coax him into. He's never been good at getting words out when he's distressed, but the moment he calms down, it gets easier.

“But I... miss my basement. I don't like being up here... alone.”

He pummels his head against my chest and I clutch the back of his neck. “You're not alone. I'm right here. I'm always here. How about this: just for tonight, you can sleep in my room.”

Lev jerks his head up. “Like a sleepover?”

I stare at my not-so-little brother's face, marveling at all that childlike joy, the innocence that has become a permanent part of his personality. I still see the boy he was. The boy he *is*, frozen in time. Trapped in a body that left him behind a long time ago.

“Yes, like a sleepover.”

He grabs me for a tight bear hug. “Sleepover!” he exclaims.
“Sleepover! Sleepover!”

Nikolai would accuse me of enabling Lev’s fears instead of helping him to face them. But I see it differently. I want him to face his fears, too.

I just don’t think he should have to face them alone.

URI

Alyssa is lying spread-eagled on the bed with her eyes trained on the ceiling. But the moment the door snaps shut, she jerks upright.

“You,” she hisses as her eyes narrow intensely.

She pops out of the bed and onto her feet. Her hands are balled into fists and I can’t look away. Is she about to fight me? I’ve got a foot and a half and a hundred-plus pounds on her. Does she really think she can take me?

Apparently, that’s exactly what she’s thinking because she charges forward, her jaw clenching with purpose. “I guess all those rumors about you were true.”

“If I got into the rumors about me, we’d be here all day.”

“I *have* been here all day,” she snaps. “Speaking of which, why the hell *am* I in this dungeon of yours?”

I look around in amusement. “I’d hardly call this a dungeon. You’ve got a flat screen TV in that nook, for Christ’s sake.”

“Oh, am I supposed to be thanking you for the very comfortable prison you’ve stashed me in?” She scoffs derisively. “Because I got news for you: it doesn’t matter how pretty or luxurious it is; a cell is still a cell. And I don’t do well in cages.”

Her chest is heaving temptingly but I make sure to keep my eyes fixed on her face. Watching those pale cheeks turn pink is strangely quite a titillating experience.

“You think I want you here?” I ask carelessly. “If I had my way, you’d be sitting in your little shack right now doing a crossword puzzle.”

She flinches backward. “Don’t do that.”

“Don’t do what?”

“Don’t act like you know me. All that information I gave you last night, I shared only because I thought—” She stops short, her eyes going just a little wider as something clicks in her brain.

I take a step closer to her. “You thought what, *narushitel*?”

“Stop with the nickname. I don’t even know what it means.”

“It means ‘little thief,’ because that’s what you are. And you didn’t mind it last night.”

“Yeah, well, you hadn’t abducted me and locked me up in the basement last night.”

Is it weird that I’m enjoying this interaction so much? Is it weird that it’s giving me a natural high better than any drug?

Her fingers are trembling as she inches closer. “Please, Uri... let me go.”

“Believe me: there’s nothing I want more.” The strange tightening in my gut says otherwise, but I choose to ignore that. “Except that you, Little Miss Pandora, went and opened a box you should have left closed. And now, it’s unleashed all manner of horrors.”

She stiffens instantly. Her eyes dart from side to side before finally settling back on me. “I thought it was my package,” she whispers in a voice that’s heartbreakingly meek.

“My name on the label didn’t tip you off?”

“I wasn’t exactly thinking straight. I had just come back home and I was flustered and distracted and thinking about—”

She stops short again, but this time, I think I know what she was about to say. “You were thinking about me.”

She grits her teeth. “Yes, I was thinking about you—but only because of... what happened. But it wasn’t like I was all googly-eyed about what happened. I was ready to put the whole thing behind me.”

“If only you hadn’t been so distracted by thoughts of me that you’d read the front of the package. There certainly weren’t any purple tentacle dildos in there.”

“It was a mis—” Her eyes go wide as she freezes mid-sentence. “You opened my package?”

“Tit for tat.”

Alyssa glares at me. “What are you—twelve years old? I wasn’t aware I was opening your package, but you sure as hell knew what you were doing when you opened mine.”

I shrug, completely unapologetic. “I had to make sure you were telling me the truth.”

“Oh, right, because I am *clearly* the suspicious one here.” Every time I keep inching closer, she keeps moving further away. Now, she’s only a foot from the bed, which is putting all sorts of ideas in my head.

That, in and of itself, is a shock. When have I ever fantasized about a woman *after* I’ve fucked her?

“*I’m* the suspicious one?” I ask, wrenching myself back to the topic at hand.

“You got a freaking finger in a box!” she exclaims. “A finger. In a box. In the mail. What kind of man gets packages like that?”

“The kind of man whose fence you should not be scaling.”

She throws her hands up in the air. “Yeah, okay, fair point. But it’s not like I knew that then. And anyway, my only concern was getting that package back before—”

“Before anyone knew all the freaky shit you’re into?”

“It’s not for me!” she explodes, practically frothing at the mouth with rage.

I have to try hard to suppress my laughter. I do a piss-poor job of it, though, which I know because her glare only gets more pointed. For a blush-prone wallflower, she's got a lot of spice.

"Right. 'Elle.' Who most definitely is a person who exists."

"She's a real freaking person! And you're a real freaking asshole. I'm sure the legion of women you fuck and forget on a nightly basis will agree with me on that one."

"Unlike you, those women have realistic expectations of me."

"It's not an unrealistic expectation to want to get out of your neighbor's house alive."

I laugh in her face. "You think I'm gonna kill you?" She takes another unsmiling step backward, which is as good as an answer. "For fuck's sake, princess: if I wanted to kill you, you'd be dead already."

"Oh, well, isn't *that* comforting." Her legs hit the edge of the bed and she hisses in surprise. She mutters under her breath, an obscenity that makes my smirk twitch, before she straightens up again. "I won't tell anyone about what I saw. I swear to you, I will take this secret to the grave. You can trust me. Just—just let me go."

"You want me to *trust* you?"

"I know that's difficult for a man like you, but I'm different. I can be trusted."

My eyes narrow. The woman really needs to work on her convincing skills. "'A man like me'? Explain what that means to you."

She swallows but her hands aren't trembling anymore. "A man who can't or won't trust anyone else."

The fact that she thinks she knows me is laughable. But I know the moment I push that point, she's going to interpret it as defensiveness.

"Listen," she continues, "you don't know me well, but I am a woman of my word. If I make a promise, I will keep it."

She's emphatic—but letting her walk off my property is no longer an option.

I sigh. “Unfortunately, your word is not enough. For the time being—”

But I'm forced to break off mid-sentence because she springs forward, her eyes wild and unhinged as her knee flies upwards towards my crotch.

It's reckless enough to take me by surprise.

Her aim isn't as pointed as her glare, though, so while her knee brushes against my balls, it doesn't make contact. At least not the kind of contact that would take me out for any length of time.

Not that it would matter even if it did. I made sure to lock the door when I walked in. Which Alyssa discovers a second later when she darts past me and tries furiously to pull it open.

She yanks hard but it remains stubbornly shut. “No!” she screams. “No! Let me out! Help! Someone! Let me OUT!”

She's pounding those delicate little fists against the door frame but her screams are making more tremors than her hands are. I gather myself and approach her from the back, noticing how quickly her confidence has melted into panic.

“Please! Someone! I—”

“No one can hear you, Alyssa.” I have to talk loudly so I can be heard over the screaming and pounding. “It's just us in here.”

She shakes her head like that'll change reality and keeps attacking the door. It feels like a weird and twisted sense of déjà vu. Except it's not Lev I'm dealing with this time.

Although, come to think of it... maybe the same approach would work here, too.

Avoiding her flailing fists, I find an opening, grab her arms, and pin them against her body. I create a human straitjacket of myself as I restrain her.

“No!” she shrieks, nearly taking out an eardrum. “Let me go!”

She kicks at the door, launching herself into the air for a moment. I pull her away from the entrance and tighten my grip on her. “Calm down. Calm down. I’m not going to hurt you. But you need to breathe.”

I’m not sure why she listens. It’s hard to believe she can hear my soft words over the racket she’s making, but almost immediately, she stops screaming. Her body is still alive with trembles and her breathing is coming in hot and heavy.

But I don’t let go. I don’t loosen my grip on her.

Her heat mingles with mine and I catch that honeysuckle scent of hers. *Don’t get distracted*, I warn myself. *This is business.*

Unfortunately, my cock has a mind of his own.

I ignore the horny little fucker and keep talking. “Just breathe. It’s gonna be okay. Just breathe.”

Her struggle turns into a last few weak spasms before she stops moving entirely. “How is it gonna be okay?” she asks softly, her voice mired down with fear. “How is anything going to be okay?”

“Because I wasn’t lying when I said that I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Why keep me here then?”

“Because, believe it or not, I’m trying to protect you.”

“From who?”

“From the men who sent me that finger. If they get wind that you opened the package and you saw what’s inside, it’s not a question of ‘if.’ They *will* kill you.”

She fits so well against the lines and grooves of my body. I don’t think I’ve ever had that thought when sex wasn’t involved.

“I need to keep you here until this situation is contained. For your own safety.”

She cranes her neck to the side and I catch a glimpse of one deep blue eye. “This isn’t a trick?”

What would be the point of a trick—to keep her here? I would love to be able to scoff at the mere thought. But the truth is, there are many other ways I could handle this situation. There are many other ways I could protect her.

Yet somehow, the idea of holding her in my house, in my space, feels like the only option I can live with.

“No. It’s this or nothing.”

Alyssa sighs. A deep, sad, tired, worried, defeated sigh.
“Okay.”

ALYSSA

I can't believe I'm accepting my fate here. But what choice do I have?

Uri holds on a little longer, as though he needs to make doubly sure that I mean it. His arms feel even more massive now that they're engulfing me, leaving no room for anything other than resignation.

When he drops them, I feel cold immediately. Wrapping my own arms around my body to make up for the loss of heat, I turn around slowly to face him.

"You're saying that you will let me go when things are safe again?"

"Yes." I'm looking for signs that he's lying, but he doesn't flinch. He doesn't falter. He doesn't look away.

"Soon?"

"Depends on your definition of 'soon.'"

"A couple of days?"

His eyebrows rise, which makes my heart sink. "Then no, *narushitel*. Not soon."

I try to tell myself that it's okay. I mean, he could have lied, right? Maybe that means he's not lying about the 'letting me go' part, either?

"How long?"

He shakes his head. “I can’t give you a timeline. The men I’m dealing with are cold-blooded killers.”

“What does that make you?”

My brain screeches in protest. *Why the hell are you asking questions you don’t want the answers to? Idiot!*

His eyes home in on me like a heat-seeking missile. “All you need to know is that you’re safe here. As long as you follow the rules and listen, everything will be fine.”

It’s up there as one of the more subtle threats I’ve ever heard, but there’s no doubt that it is in fact a threat. *Stay and you’ll be safe. Leave and you’re a dead woman.*

Right. Real freaking comforting.

But the sad truth is, I’m running low on options. There’s no way out of this basement and even if there was, I’m facing a legion of surveillance and security guards. Not to mention a high freaking fence with Garfield-exposing nails everywhere. I’m at Uri’s mercy. For as long as he says I am.

This right here—this is why I avoid intimacy. Nothing good ever comes out of it.

His eyes drop to my wrist and only then do I realize that I’m rubbing my charm link between my thumb and my index finger. I drop it and push my hands behind my back.

What would you do, Ziva?

The moment I ask the question, the answer pops into my head. Ziva would play him. She would let him think that she was going to be the perfect little hostage. She would lull him into a false sense of security and then she would take the opportunity when it presented itself. As soon as he slipped up, she’d run like hell.

So that’s what I’m gonna do, too.

“Okay, I’ll stay put. But I would like to be comfortable here.”

He frowns and looks around pointedly. “You have everything you’ll ever need.”

I scowl. “Except windows.”

“If they can’t see you, they can’t kill you,” he replies flatly.

I shudder. Is it possible to see death and violence so much that you become flippant about it? He’s throwing around the idea of murder like it doesn’t mean a damn thing.

“I need to breathe!” I protest. “I need natural sunlight! Vitamin D. Do you know how important Vitamin D is for your skin? Very.”

“I’ll get you supplements.”

Is he smiling? No. No he can’t be smiling at this. “You’re infuriating.”

He has the audacity to sigh. As though *I’m* the unreasonable one. “I’m sure, if you prove that you can be trusted, I can schedule some sunlight for you once a day.”

My eyes pop open. I’m not sure where to start with that statement so I just go for the practical thing to be outraged about. “‘Once a day’? That’s it? Like I’m some kind of shady criminal who can only be let out for my daily hour of prison yard time?”

“It won’t be like this forever.”

“So you say. But the fact that you have this basement set up in the first place suggests otherwise.” I stretch my neck from side to side because every muscle in my body is spasming miserably at the thought of endless solitary confinement. “Who is it that stayed here before me?”

Immediately, I know I’ve asked the wrong question. His eyes get tight and his jaw does that clenching thing that makes his cheekbones look so much sharper. “That’s none of your concern.”

Play the good little hostage. Don’t engage. Don’t snap at him. Don’t—

“Actually, considering I’m clearly your latest prisoner in a long line of them, it *is* my concern. I’ve spent the last few hours in here combing through all the stuff I can find and I can’t decide if you’re kidnapping model plane enthusiasts or little boys. Either way, it doesn’t look—”

“As I said, it’s none of your concern. Asking questions is not in your best interests, Alyssa. Being nosy is not in your best interests, either.”

I gulp. On second thought, I think I prefer his subtler threats.

Uri strides past me towards the door. Despite how little I like him right now, the thought of watching him walk out the door terrifies me. It’s got nothing to do with him; it just feels like the room is ten times smaller when I’m in here alone.

Almost like the walls are closing in on me.

Elle likes to say that the only reason I became a travel writer is because I’m claustrophobic. This country got to be too small for me. Well, if a country wasn’t big enough, this room sure as hell isn’t.

“Wait!” I cry out. To my surprise, Uri pauses at the threshold. “Can I at least go back home long enough to pack a bag? Get some of my things?”

It feels like a pretty reasonable request in my opinion but his lips purse up tight. “There’s a bunch of papers and pens in that desk over by the fireplace. You can write a list of all the stuff you want and I’ll retrieve it for you.”

I’m wondering just how much I can get away with when he nips that thought in the bud. “And just so you know, I’m not getting you your cellphone or laptop.”

“So I really am your prisoner?”

He glowers at me. “For now... yes.”

I square my shoulders but I refuse to let my face fall. I may be at his mercy but he doesn’t get the satisfaction of seeing my fear. “I have friends and family, you know. They’re gonna get suspicious if they don’t hear from me.”

“Of course. I’m sure ‘Elle’ will be wondering what’s taking her purple dildo so long.”

“I have other friends besides Elle!”

What am I doing? Why am I engaging?

He takes a few steps back towards me. “Do you? Are you talking about the other senior citizens who live on this hill? Mrs. Heidegger will be just fine with her cats.”

“What are you implying?” I demand. “Because I got news for you, buddy: those women you parade around here every night aren’t ‘friends,’ either. Neither are your bodyguards or security crew or any of the other goons you hire to keep everyone else out!”

One eyebrow twitches. Uri doesn’t say anything for a long time. Then: “This is not about me, is it? This is about you.”

I don’t take that obvious piece of bait. “I need to be able to call my friends. My parents. My job.”

But Uri has already turned his back on me again. “We’ll sort something out,” he drawls without elaborating in the slightest. “Get that list ready and I’ll make sure everything is brought to you.”

Then the door slams. I’m alone again.

And strangely—I feel it.

I’m not saying I enjoyed the way he grabbed me before. But I’m not saying I didn’t *not* enjoy it, either. It was this intense combination of *get me outta here* along with *don’t ever let go*.

The first instinct was normal, entirely expected. The second was more confusing. Why on Earth *wouldn’t* I want him to let me go?

Instinct is telling me that it wasn’t about Uri. Well—it wasn’t *only* about him. It was about the feeling of being held like that. It didn’t feel claustrophobic or invasive. It was almost... nurturing. Protective, in a way. It was like he was trying to hold me together while I was falling apart.

And the only person who’s ever really done that for me was Ziva.

I take a deep breath and walk over to the bed. I collapse onto it and try to think of nothing, but I keep going back to that feeling. The needy desire to be held.

I pound my fists against the bed in frustration. It makes no sense that I would feel anything remotely close to comfort in *this* place, from *that* man. As it stands, I do loathe him. I just feel a lot of other things for him, too...

Before tonight, he was my dark, broody, mysterious billionaire neighbor with a chip on his shoulder. He was the guy who stormed into the city zoning committee to threaten them about tearing down my house. He was the guy who tore through women like those women tore through clothes. He was the guy who was so stinking rich he could get away with blue murder.

But after the fence, the bandage, dinner... he became someone else.

Turns out he wasn't the mustache-twirling villain I'd created in my head. I mean, he was that, yes, but there's more to Uri Bugrov's story than meets the eye. And I'm not talking severed body parts, either. I'm talking about the family he refuses to talk about. The lovingly furnished basement that's currently my home.

This place wasn't built to be a prison; it was built to be a sanctuary.

But for whom?

I lie back and close my eyes. I do what I do whenever I feel stressed or anxious. I run my hands over my body, touching myself gently. When other girls, normal girls feel this way, they go partying. They go to a nice club, catch the eye of a cute boy, and work out their frustrations the ol' fashioned way.

By getting good and hammered, then good and laid.

But me? Give me a little light background music and some peace and I'm good to go. I call myself independent. Elle calls me a coward. The scientific term she uses is "scaredy-cat."

Right now, I'm not interested in trying to wade through the recesses of my subconscious. I just want to feel better. And nothing calms me down faster than a good orgasm.

I'm fondling my breasts when I flash back to a few minutes ago.

Uri. Me. My back pressed up against his chest. His erection grinding hard against my hip.

My eyes fly open and my hand freezes on my boobs.

Oh, *hell* no.

The man just locked me in a damn dungeon, for crying out loud. He does *not* deserve to be the star of my fantasies. I am not about to spend one single second of my precious time on this planet lusting after my captor. That is some serious Stockholm Syndrome shit.

And I will not partake.

That's it. End of story. That's all she wrote.

But I'm wet and needy now. And my body really wants a release. My mind could do with one, too.

I try again, slipping my fingers inside my jeans while I urge myself to relax. Except I can't relax because I'm too busy trying not to think about my captor.

"Goddammit!" I snap. "Fine. So be it. But starting in half an hour, I will never think about Uri Bugrov this way again."

I slide my finger over my clit and massage slowly, all the while picturing his face, remembering the way he wrapped his arms around me, the way he touched me, the way he took me on that dining room table, forcing my body to feel things that it hadn't felt in a long time.

I throw myself into this forbidden moment, all the while promising myself that it will never, ever happen again.

URI

Her list is decidedly practical. Toothpaste, dental floss, moisturizer. She's asked for some clothes, too, but she hasn't made specific requests. No "bring me the purple sweater with the black stripes, NOT the lavender turtleneck with the dark gray stripes" like I might've guessed based on her attitude today. Instead, she's written in a neat, slanting hand, "a couple of t-shirts, leggings and/or jeans." She's also asked for pajamas, though I'm tempted to "forget" them so she has no choice but to sleep naked.

I scowl at my own juvenile bullshit. *Get your head in the game, mudak.*

Stepping into her space, even though I've already been here, is unsettling. Things have changed. I glance around, looking for clues about what kind of person this new obsession of mine really is.

The little bungalow was already small, but it feels even smaller after she's crowded it with endless junk. I spy an hourglass from Egypt, a snow globe from Paris, a miniature opera house from Sydney, a keychain from Peru; the list goes on and on. They sit on every surface, collecting dust and looking bored.

She does have two of everything, weirdly enough. An extensive collection of his-and-hers pairings. The same mugs but in different colors. The same plates but with different patterns.

Based on this kitchen alone, I'd guess she lived with someone. But there's no evidence of another person apart from Alyssa's shit.

I check my phone absentmindedly. I'm waiting on a call from Carl, the private detective on my payroll. Not that I need him when I can figure out certain things for myself. Most of Alyssa's life is painfully obvious. The woman travels a lot and I'm guessing her job is to blame. But for a traveler, there's a distinct absence of photographs anywhere.

Until I comb through her chest of drawers and find an old shoebox stuffed far out of sight.

It's filled with pictures. The more recent ones feature Alyssa alongside a young woman about her age. She sports platinum blonde hair and a confident smile. That would be the mysterious Elle, I assume.

But as I flip back, another girl starts to appear in almost all the older pictures. She's dark-haired and dark-eyed and there's a certain something in her eyes that captures my attention. A fearless gaze that doesn't hold even the tiniest bit of self-consciousness.

I'm still immersed in the pictures when my phone starts ringing. Carl. "Hey, bossman, the results just came in from the background check you asked me to do," he says in his raspy Boston accent. "The broad came out squeaky clean. You can go ahead and hire her without thinking twice about it."

"I'm not looking to hire her. I just need to know her background. Give me the summary."

"Oh. Ah. Right. Er, lemme check the notes here. Born in San Diego to a Mark and Linda Walsh. Pops was a teacher; Mom stayed home. Her father's retired now. She had a twin sister with a weird name but it says here that she, er, died."

That catches my attention. "She had a twin?"

"Yeah, Z... Zi... Ziva Walsh. Died at seventeen."

I glance down again at the photo in my hands. They look nothing alike. I wouldn't have pegged them for sisters, let alone twins. But the way they've got their arms wrapped

around each other suggests that their bond was forged early and made to last forever.

I realize belatedly that Carl is still talking. “Wait, what was that?”

“Oh, I was just saying that this chick is a travel writer. Freelance. She’s gotten offers from a handful of different companies for steady writing positions but she’s turned them all down.”

I frown. “Why?”

“Unclear. You’d have to ask her.”

Why does everything seem to go back to talking to her? That is the thing I most want to avoid.

Maybe that’s because it’s the thing you most want to do.

“I mean, I know I sound like a hack here, but there really wasn’t much there to look into, boss. She’s a freakin’ Girl Scout.”

I snort. Based on the package of sex toys still sitting on her bed where I left them last night, I doubt that.

“Any relationship info I should know about?”

Carl hesitates. “Uh, relationship info?”

This fucking asshole’s gonna make me say it. “How many boyfriends has she had? Has she been married before? Does she have a secret child stashed away somewhere?”

I hear the shuffle of paper. “Oh, nah, no real info worth noting on past relationships. Honestly, this girl reads like a straight-up shut-in. Awful young to be livin’ like such a grandma, you know? Hey—you think she’s a vampire?”

I respond by hanging up.

I put away the shoebox and go back to prowling around. Nothing else is as interesting. Once I’ve snooped sufficiently, I do a final runthrough of the list she’s given me. I have everything she’s asked for, plus a few extras just in case.

Then my eyes land on the package on her bed. The one that got us both into this mess in the first place.

Leave it, idiot, snarls the logical voice in my head.

It's right. I should. I throw the duffel over my shoulder and start to make for the exit.

But at the last second, I scoop up the box of sex toys and go home.



When I get back to the house, I find Lev skulking by the front door. I only notice him because his shadow is cast long and skinny by the moonlight.

“Lev.”

“What’s that?” he asks as his face brightens with interest. “Is that a present? Is it for me?”

There are moments when I see a flash of the person that Lev used to be. The surly teenager, prone to long bouts of silence and quick flashes of wit. The boy who would’ve spent every waking second outdoors if he could have gotten away with it. The brother who used to carry Polly around on his shoulders when I got tired. It’s like that person existed only for a fleeting second before he was gone forever. Along with all the possibilities of who he might have been.

“No, Lev. This is business.”

He pouts but his eyes never leave the duffel bag. “Can I see what’s inside?”

“No.”

He frowns deeply. “Can I guess what’s—”

“This doesn’t concern you, *brat.*”

His eyebrows straighten out and his mouth drops. In fact, his entire face falls. I’m not usually so brusque with him.

Goddammit. This is the last thing I need right now. “Lev—”

But he's already scampered off into the gaming room where he likes to hide out on those rare occasions when he can be coaxed out of the basement. Groaning inwardly at my own impatience, I drop the duffel bag and box off in my office and then go after him.

He's ignored the leather sectional, the recliners, and the beanbags. Instead, he's sitting cross-legged on the carpet with his controller in hand and his headphones shucked off to the side.

"Lev." He flinches but he doesn't look at me. "Can you put that away for a second, please?"

He does it reluctantly. His fingers rake through his hair again and again, a sure sign that I've agitated him.

"I'm sorry about being short with you. It's been a long day and things have been stressful at work."

He's not one for maintaining eye contact in general, but when he's upset about something, I'm hard-pressed to get him to so much as look anywhere in my general direction.

"I don't want you to think I'm mad at you, okay? I'm not. I'm just tired."

That gets a tiny reaction. His hand falls to his lap.

I pick up one of the free controllers. "Can I play with you?"

After a long, drawn-out pause, he nods. It's just the smallest of inclines but from Lev, it means a lot.

We play for half an hour with not a word spoken between us. Lev's eyes are glued to the screen as his fingers fly over the buttons with amazing speed. He beats me effortlessly, but that's fine. He has his domain. I have mine.

"I want my basement," he blurts when the game ends. "I don't like the upstairs room."

I glance at him, though he stays looking at the screen. "You'll get it back soon. I just need a little more time."

He doesn't say anything but his hand runs through his hair again. It's a stark reminder that the little siren in the basement

can't stay there forever.

For more reasons than one.

ALYSSA

I've gotten used to being alone.

It's better that way. I'm most comfortable when I'm by myself.

At least, that's what I *used* to think. Before I realized what being alone truly meant. As it turns out, I had no freaking clue.

Sure, I lived alone and traveled alone. But I was always surrounded by people, by noise, by new experiences or old friends. When I traveled, I got to see new cultures and try new foods and I'd fall into bed at night too tired to think about the things I didn't have anymore. And when I was at home, my days were filled with visits to Mrs. Heidegger down the street, hangouts with Elle, that kind of thing.

Now that I don't have my phone, I realize how much I relied on it to fill the dark in-between moments.

It's been at least twenty-four hours, if not more, that I've been trapped in this basement with no company, no sunlight, and no hope of getting out anytime soon.

The walls are closing in.

I've combed through the entirety of the basement looking for something to distract me. There are plenty of video games but I've never really been much of a gamer. Elle's future husband, on the other hand... The man's obsessed. Elle likes to joke that she's his second love. He would be thoroughly impressed by the collection on display—but me? Yeah, not so much.

But it's the only option I have left, so when I come up empty on entertainment options, I turn to the TV.

That's demoralizing on its own, because it takes me half an hour just to figure out how to turn it on. I swear, remotes like those are designed specifically to make a person feel stupid.

Some tech god takes pity on me and an accidental button press pulls up a nature documentary. That'll suffice. I watch giraffes migrate across the savannas for three or four hours before my brain says enough and I fall into a restless sleep.

I wake up to darkness with my stomach rumbling. I find a bag of chips in the kitchen and feast, pretending I'm a sub-Saharan lion with a fresh kill. After a while, though, I get sick of that as well. The basement is so quiet that my own bodily functions are magnified and I've just discovered how much I hate the sound of my own chewing and breathing.

The walls are closing in.

I'm scared and agitated and tired and still hungry when I hear the bolt of the door unlock. I bounce upright, but the sudden motion makes my head spin. I've been staring up at the ceiling for so long that my vision is marred by black spots and gold stars. By the time my eyes adjust, his silhouette takes shape in front of me.

Here's the thing about me: I'm not an angry person. I'm not a confrontational person. I pride myself on being able to handle most situations with calm and patience.

But after over twenty-four hours locked in a basement with no windows, no human contact, and no connection to the outside world, I don't feel like myself at all. I feel *feral*.

I swing my legs off the island and jump to the floor. The only thing that keeps me vertical is the anger coursing through my body.

"You absolute piece of *shit*," I snarl.

Uri arches an amused brow. "Good evening to you, too."

He rounds the island and starts putting down the bags he brought with him. I can't see any of my things, but I note fresh vegetables, some fruit, a package of chicken thighs.

“‘Good evening’?” I repeat. “‘Good *evening*’? That’s all you’ve got to say?”

He doesn’t even give me the dignity of standing still so that I can look him in the eye while I let him have it. He just moves around the kitchen, unloading the groceries, as though this situation right here is totally normal.

For all I know, it *is* totally normal for him. Maybe he gets off on abducting unsuspecting women and keeping them in his weird, childlike hideaway to do God-knows-what with.

“Why don’t you sit down?” Uri suggests coolly.

“*Don’t* tell me what to do! It’s been a whole freaking day and I haven’t seen daylight *once*.” I pause for a moment, waiting for him to interject. He doesn’t, which only pisses me off further. “I told you in the morning that I don’t do well in cages. I can’t breathe in here! I can’t move in here! I can’t... I can’t *think* in here!”

That last part is not entirely true. My real problem is that, left to my own devices, I think *too* much.

I think about the four muddled years of college that I basically stumbled through in a grieving daze.

I think about what the statute of limitations on returning your parents’ calls is before you’re officially labeled a bad daughter.

I think about all the different career options I’ve cast aside in favor of a job that would allow me to leave the country any chance I got.

But mostly, I think about Ziva. And I ponder how different my life would have been if she had lived.

“Here.”

I blink at the glass of water Uri is offering me. “I don’t want water.”

“Drink it anyway.”

My hand inches forward like it wants to obey him, but I force it back down to my side at the last minute. “You don’t get to just walk in here whenever you please and act like

everything's normal. You don't get to act as though *I'm* the crazy one and you're the Good Samaritan."

"I've never claimed to be a good anything. Nor will I."

"This place..." I say, gesturing around me. "It's inhuman to keep someone down here. I know you're a freak, but most people need light and air and sun and trees and grass... and *other* people." He sighs, but I'm not done yet. "How the hell do you expect me to trust that you're keeping me here for my own safety when it feels so much like a prison? When I can't contact my friends and family? When you haven't given me a *choice*?"

He doesn't say anything. Is that a strategy or something? Is he angry? Is he just handling me by ignoring me?

"And your big, fancy flat screen TV? It barely has any channels. The streaming sites are all password-protected! The books and toys are meant for children. The video games are beyond me and there's not even a radio or a speaker—something, *anything* that will make music! Did the person living here before me go insane? Is that it? Is that why you had to go looking for another victim?"

I'm out of breath when I finish my rant. One look at Uri and I feel unhinged. He's just so calm standing there in his white t-shirt, his windswept dark hair, his fingernails rapping on the marble countertop.

I hate that despite my anger, my attraction for him still exists. It's throbbing right below the surface like a warning bell.

But it'll fade. I'm sure of that. He'll defend himself, feed me a bunch of lame excuses, I'll fight back, he'll fight back, and that'll be the nail in the coffin.

He opens his mouth to feed me some more condescending bullshit. Stuff like:

"I'm sorry."

Wait. Hold on. I freeze. I'm pretty sure I heard him wrong, right? I must have. There's no way that this man is capable of apologizing quite so easily.

“I’m sorry,” he says again. Uri meets my gaze. “I should have made sure you were more comfortable. I should have brought you your things sooner. I got caught up in work and that delayed me. It was my mistake.”

On the one hand, it feels good to hear him say he’s sorry. On the other hand, it’s not really helping kill my attraction for him.

“I didn’t intend to stay away for this long. I also didn’t think you’d struggle so hard with being alone. But I suppose now, it makes sense.”

My insides bristle. “What makes sense?”

“There’s something about losing a sibling that makes you feel uniquely isolated. I can’t imagine what it must have been like to lose your twin.”

Goosebumps erupt all over my arms. I probably should be outraged but somehow, I can’t find it in myself to muster up anymore anger. Maybe it’s the fact that he says those words with so much... understanding? It makes me wonder—is he talking about the parents he lost or is there someone else?

“The two of you were close?”

I swallow. “Very.”

Dammit. One word and still my voice shakes. A sob escapes my lips, but I shut right down. *Not the time for that.*

Uri just nods. “It must have been difficult to navigate the world once she was no longer in it.”

The lump in my throat is only growing bigger. If he keeps this up, I’m going to be bawling all over the fresh fruit. “I don’t...” I have to stop. I can’t even speak right now. I just shake my head.

“It’s okay,” he says gently. “You don’t want to talk about her. I understand.”

And the thing is, it really feels like he *does* understand. I end up sitting back down. I end up taking the glass of water he offered me earlier. I end up watching him cook.

When he's done, he spoons two generous servings of pasta into a bowl and pushes it towards me. "Would you like some company for dinner?" My eyes flit to his as he asks the question. "If you'd rather be alone, I can leave."

I probably should tell him to go. I shouldn't want to break bread with my captor. But the idea of being alone again is terrifying.

I'm not ready to deal with the silence just yet.

So all I say is, "Stay."

ALYSSA

“Paris is overrated.”

I roll my eyes. “It is not overrated. Everybody has just gotten so jaded about everything. They can’t just enjoy things for what they are. They have to assign values to things and places and people and it sucks out the fun of just, like, being in the moment. Letting yourself experience a place without the tags people have forced on them.”

Uri snorts as I climb down off my metaphorical soapbox. “I think you’ve had enough wine,” he remarks.

He makes a show of reaching for my glass. I snatch it before he can and hold it out of his reach.

“I’m serious. Paris is the city of love, right? There’s this expectation of romance, magic, mystique. But the first time I went to Paris was after a breakup. I was sad and lonely and I even tried to put off the trip because my boyfriend was supposed to come with me and I didn’t really want to go on my own.”

“Let me guess: you had a midnight in Paris moment and you started to change your perspective.”

I scowl. “Do you always make a habit of interrupting other people’s stories with your cynicism?”

He smiles. “A thousand apologies. Continue.”

“No, you ruined it.”

He chuckles. “I was right, wasn’t I?”

I groan noisily. “You weren’t wrong, per se. I walked the Pont des Arts. I ate croissants and pain au chocolate and stood in line for a cup of hot chocolate that changed my life. I walked through a Parisian park and met this group of old men playing chess under the trees. And what I realized was, it *was* magical. It *was* romantic. I didn’t need a boyfriend. I just needed to embrace the experience.”

“How very poetic.”

“It figures you’d be one of the jaded ones.”

“I’m not jaded.” He shrugs. “I just see things for what they are. Paris is a city just like any other city. It smells like piss, simmers with unrest, and hides pickpockets round every corner. Sure, they make a good hot chocolate—but I can make you the same one right here, right now. And you don’t have to stand in line for it.”

“I just have to stay in this basement for God knows how long?”

“Until otherwise noted.” He picks up the bottle of wine and tops up my glass. “At least there’s good booze.”

I lift my wine glass and hide behind it for a second. The last couple of hours have flown by. It’s annoying how easy it is to talk to him. Not that we’ve spoken about anything overly personal, but then again, isn’t everything personal in one way or another?

“Getting me drunk is not gonna make me forget anything, Uri.”

His eyes connect with mine for a moment, but he looks away just as quickly. Contrary to what Uri seems to think, the alcohol hasn’t made me goofy or wiped my memory—it’s relaxed me. It’s made me feel like sitting down to dinner with my captor is totally normal. Charming, even.

But I can’t help wondering how many other women have experienced this very same thing in this very same basement. How is he getting away with this?

It can’t be just because he’s handsome and charming, can it? No, that’s too simplistic an answer. Maybe it has more to do

with the women he chooses. Maybe I'm here not because I chose to scale a fence to retrieve my package, but because he looked into my soul during our first dinner and saw the loneliness inside me. He saw that I was lost; he saw that I was broken. He saw that I needed to lose myself in something else in order to survive.

That was another thing that the therapist said to me in those hazy, miserable post-Ziva days. *You like immersing yourself in experiences and people to avoid your own issues.*

Of course, I told her that I had no issues to avoid and stormed out.

Maybe that should have been my first clue that she was right.

Laughter bursts through my lips unexpectedly, taking even me by surprise. Uri watches me carefully, not saying a word until after it's subsided.

"What's so funny?"

Nothing's funny, I want to tell him. It's all just different kinds of pain, and if you don't laugh, you'll end up crying.

But opening up to Uri Bugrov is firmly off the table. "I was just thinking... this would be so much like a date if it weren't for the fact that I can't just leave once dessert is over."

"I'm not seeing the humor in that," he drawls.

"It's not funny in a *ha-ha* kinda way. It's funny in a *look at where my life is at* kind of way. I'll bet all the women who came before me thought the same thing."

His nostrils flare for a second. His chest rises and falls as he picks up his wine glass and gives it a practiced twirl. "Do you even realize how serious this is?" His voice is tight and thrumming with tension. It's as though he's trying his best to stay calm.

A little thrill runs down my spine. It's nice to know that I have the power to rile him up. "Of course I realize it. I'm the one who's been trapped here all day."

The blue of his eyes is really something. It's a bright aquamarine, the kind of color you see only way out in the

ocean on a hot day.

“You are the first woman to stay down here. And, I can say with some confidence, you’ll be the last.”

“If that’s supposed to be reassuring, try again.”

“It’s a statement of fact. You’ll return to your life once I’ve handled this threat and I’ll get my basement back.”

“Your basement, huh?” I ask. “Does that mean *you* enjoy video games and Legos?”

I’m fishing and we both know it, but Uri’s expression doesn’t change. “On occasion. It can be very therapeutic.”

I snort derisively. “So... are you going to tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“Who the finger belonged to?”

His demeanor doesn’t change. He has very few tells that I can see. It’s gonna take me longer to crack his code than I’d hoped for. Although maybe I shouldn’t want to crack his code at all. In fact, that might be the safer option.

“What did I tell you about asking questions?” he rumbles.

That’s the thing about sitting down to dinner with a person: you start talking. And when you start talking, you get a feel of the person you’re eating with. You don’t even have to swap personal stories to get to know them. Sometimes, getting to know a person is as simple as finding out that he likes his fish undersalted and his pasta swimming in butter.

His rippling anger would have freaked me out twenty-four hours ago. In fact, it did. But now? I find myself shrugging it off like a child who refuses to listen.

“I like questions. They get to the point.”

“The point here is your safety,” he tells me firmly. “The finger is my problem and the moment I deal with it, you will be free to go.”

“And until then?”

“Until then, you are safe here. If you need anything, all you have to do is ask.”

I sigh. “Unless of course I ask for my phone.”

“This one, you mean?” From the pocket of his pants, he pulls out none other than my phone.

The bright orange case winks at me like an old friend. Gasping, I reach for it instinctively but Uri pulls it out of my reach. “You get this phone for the next five minutes.”

My mouth drops open. “What can I do in five minutes?”

“You can text work, friends, and family and let them know that you’re going to be taking a last-minute job in Cuba, where the work will be difficult and the cell service will be unreliable.”

Oh. Shoulda known there’d be serious strings attached.

“You’re covering your bases,” I say, scowling at him.

He smiles serenely. “I’m nothing if not thorough. Now—can I trust you?”

Play the good little hostage, advises the little voice in my head. *Do what Ziva would do.*

I nod and only then does he hand me my phone. I’m trying to figure out how to send Elle a text that will tip her off without being obvious on the surface of it when his shadow engulfs me.

“Seriously?” I growl, craning my neck towards him. “You’re going to stand over my shoulder and watch? What about returning the favor and trusting *me*?”

“I don’t trust anyone.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to think that’s the right way to go.”

I end up writing three relatively short texts; one to my parents, one to a publication that I have ongoing work with, and one to Elle.

“Good,” Uri says from over my shoulder. That scotch-cinnamon scent of his is really making me want to step away.

“Just add that you’ll be gone for a few weeks.”

“Few *weeks*?!” I shriek, nearly dropping my phone in the process. “You’ve got to be kidding me!”

He’s completely unmoved. “These things take time.”

“You can’t expect me to stay here *that* long.”

I swivel around on the bar stool to glare at him. That turns out to be a *big* mistake, because now, I’m face to face with those smoldering aquamarine eyes and he’s got the full force of them aimed directly at me.

“Would you rather be killed in broad daylight?” he demands. “Would you rather walk around looking over your shoulder every time you step out of the house? Would you rather duck and run every time you see a white van pass by? Shadows can kill you before you even realize they’re hiding people inside of them, *narushitel*. You can let me protect you—*my way*—or you can fend for yourself against killers you’ll never hear coming.”

Sighing deeply, I close my eyes for a moment. Mostly because I need to get my bearings, but also because I want to escape his gaze. When I open them again, I type what he wants me to type and hand the phone over forcefully.

“There.”

“Thank you.”

I follow him awkwardly back to the door. I can see a huge duffel bag of my things sitting by the foot of the bed.

“That should keep you occupied,” he says, opening the door and putting himself in the threshold. “But just in case you need a little extra entertainment...” He picks up something from the other side of the door. “This should help.”

Uri deposits the package into my hands and I realize a second later why it looks so familiar.

Eve’s Garden.

“Enjoy,” he says with a straight face while my face burns red.

Then he leaves.

URI

“We got an ID on the finger.”

I can tell by Nikolai’s grim tone that it is exactly what we suspected it was. “Igor?”

“Igor,” he confirms.

His breathing sounds heavy but I don’t have to ask him what’s going on to know he’s in the gym, working out his frustrations. The year after I took the mantel of *pakhan*, he practically lived there.

“Can you stop lifting weights and sit still so we can talk?”

I hear something heavy drop and then a second later, his voice comes through loud and clear. “Just for the record, I was doing pull-ups,” he says shortly. “This move has Sobakin written all over it. We have to do something, Uri. We need to go in and get Igor back.”

My gut twists. “This is Boris Sobakin we’re talking about, Nikolai. You and I both know that Igor is already dead.”

“What if he’s not?”

“Then it’s a trap. He’s anticipated that we’ll try to rescue Igor and he’s going to be prepared. All that will lead to is more dead bodies.”

“So your plan is to do nothing?” he asks coldly.

“My plan is to play the long game. This is not about winning the battle; it’s about winning the war. So far, Sobakin has

proved himself to be cunning. Brute force isn't going to help us here."

"It will be a show of strength! At least he'll think twice about moving against us."

"Who are you kidding? He's already decided he's gunning for us. Returning fire with fire won't stop him. What we need to do is lie low and wait for an opportunity to catch him off-guard."

The silence on the other line is telling. "Is that what you've decided?" he asks at last.

"That's what I've decided."

"And what are you going to tell the men?"

"Exactly what I just told you."

"Oh, perfect. I'm sure it'll be a great comfort to them to know that, if any one of them were to be abducted carrying out our orders, you'd be sitting on your ass, 'playing the long game.'"

I re-grip the phone in my hand. "My men will understand that sometimes, sacrifices must be made for the good of the many."

"You are the *pakhan*," he says grudgingly. "Your will, our hands."

Even a stranger would hear the bitterness in his voice when he says those words.

I sigh as we hang up. If only Nikolai was the second brother. That one twist of fate would have solved so much about our fractured, fraught relationship.

When I go down to my bedroom, I find Lev in there, building a Lego castle three stories high.

"Where were you?" he asks, glancing towards the vintage clock on the wall.

"I had work to finish, buddy."

"You're *always* working."

The guilt pinches away at me, same as always, but I've learned to ignore it. I sit down next to him but I don't touch any of the

toy bricks. I know better than to push my way into a project that's halfway complete.

“Did you eat dinner?”

“Yeah...”

“What did you eat?”

“Mac and cheese. Mirabel tried to make me eat meat but I didn't want to.”

“You used to love it.”

He concentrates hard on his castle. “No, I didn't.”

Suppressing a sigh, I watch as he constructs another tower. My room is a disaster area of scattered bricks, but at least he's calm here. Maybe I can even convince him to sleep in his upstairs room tonight.

“Can I sleep with you tonight, too?”

Blyat'. Spoke too soon.

“How about we try your room today?”

His eyebrows knit together. “I want my *basement*.”

“Didn't you like the fish tank I put in there for you?” I ask, but he only shrugs. “And the wallpaper? You love blue and green. It's like the ocean. Maybe we'll take a trip to the ocean one day. What do you think?”

He starts shaking his head feverishly. “No... I don't want that... I don't want...”

I grab his shoulder, but he flinches away from me and sidles back as far as the room allows. “I want my basement... my basement... my basement...”

“Hey, it's okay, Lev. Just breathe.”

My calm voice doesn't work as well as it did on Alyssa. Lev just seems to get more and more agitated. It's another painful reminder that, even all these years after the accident, his progress is fluid. It ebbs and flows, and when it ebbs, it ebbs *hard*.

“Basement... basement... basement...”

What an ironic twist. Alyssa is desperate to get out of there; Lev is desperate to get back in. The only thing they have in common is that they're both driving me fucking crazy.

"You can sleep in my room, okay? It's fine."

Lev's shaking slows. He peers at me from between his raised knees. "Here?"

"Here."

That seems to placate him. He eyes me warily before he scoots back over and finishes his tower. I know better than to push him when he's fragile like this, so I sit quietly and observe until it's done. Only then do I tell him to go get ready for bed.

I wait until he's tucked into my bed, then I take a seat on the armchair by the window and wait some more until he falls asleep. Eventually, his tired snores fill the room, leaving me with this stark sense of loss that I can't quite put my finger on. A boy's snores in a man's body. One story twisted and broken into something it was never meant to be by a cruel twist of fate.

It's happening everywhere I look.

Thankfully, my phone distracts me with an incoming text message from Polly.

POLINA: *yo, shithead. you've been quiet this week so I thought I'd check in. how's things?*

I gnash my teeth together. I'm usually diligent about my texts to Polly. At least twice a week, I'll check in to make sure she's okay at her boarding school. But this week, between the adult child in my bed and the unassuming little siren in my basement, I'd completely forgotten.

I text her back. *Forgot to text you. It's been a terrible fucking week. Are you okay?*

POLLY: *is it Lev? is he okay?*

URI: *Lev's fine.*

POLLY: *call?*

Great. One more crisis to deal with. I'm in fine form this week.

Give me a minute.

I'm slipping out of the room when my phone starts vibrating. Apparently, she doesn't even trust me to call her. "Evening, *printsessa*."

"I hate when you call me that."

"You didn't always."

"I was *seven*," she snaps with that irritated laugh in her voice that I've always considered one of her best qualities.

"You haven't grown up as much as you think you have. How's school?"

"Nuh-uh. I didn't call to talk about me. We're talking about *you* today."

"There's nothing to say. Just work stuff. I may have exaggerated slightly in the text."

"You never exaggerate."

"No, I don't." I sigh. "But there's a first time for everything."

Like locking an infuriating little kiska in my basement with a purple dildo and all the time in the world to use it.

She sighs. "You need to take time for yourself, too, you know. You can't look after all of us all the time. You'll burn out."

I grit my teeth. "I'm fine. Tell me about school."

She answers me with another pointed sigh melodramatic enough to match my own. "School's fine. We dissected frogs today in biology."

"Foul."

She giggles. "Dissecting frogs is gross but dissecting people is fine?"

I freeze for a moment, before I realize that there's no way she knows about the finger. She's only fourteen. Smart as a whip, but a child nonetheless. Nikolai and I have tried too damn hard to shield her from the more unsavory parts of our lives—but

you wouldn't believe how much a kid notices, especially when she's not supposed to.

"We do nothing of the sort."

"Sure, sure." I can practically see her disbelieving eye roll.

"And Lev is fine?"

"He's sleeping in my bed as we speak."

"Told you the upstairs room wouldn't take."

"No one likes a smart ass, Pol."

She laughs. "Okay, you're in a mood, so I'm gonna hang up now. It's way past curfew and I have an early track practice tomorrow. See you this weekend."

Shit. In all the chaos, I completely forgot that Polly was going to be coming home on weekends this semester. I check my watch. It's Thursday. Fucking hell—there's no chance this mess is cleaned up in time.

"Yes, see you this weekend. Oh, and one more thing—"

"Yes, everyone in school is treating me well," she interrupts, beating me to the punch. I smirk. I usually end our conversations with that question. "Don't order a hit on anyone, mmkay?"

"You'll let me know if that changes?"

"Goodnight, big brother."

"Goodnight, *printsessa*."

All I hear is a cranky "ugh" before she hangs up.

My smile disappears the moment I drop my phone. Lev is one thing, but Polly? She notices everything and she can smell a secret a mile away. And this particular secret isn't a mile away at all.

It's right below our feet. In my basement, with a box full of sex toys.

ALYSSA

Uri Bugrov may be hotter, taller, and richer than the average man, but in the end, he's no different.

He breaks his promises just like the rest of them.

Not that he had technically promised to visit more often, but considering he'd apologized for having been a no-show the entire day, he made me think that he would work to correct it.

I don't actually want to see him. But I do want the comfort of human contact. I want to hear another person's voice, smell another person's scent. And if I don't have a choice in who I get to see, then I'll settle for him.

Except he's not interested in comforting me. Since bringing me back a bunch of my stuff and a handful of sex toys (*cringe*), he seems to think that he has handled things. Like, *la-di-freaking-da*, I'll now be totally content with my knitting basket and my crossword puzzles. *Thanks a lot, Uri Claus.*

To be fair, those things help for the first twelve hours. I knit a full-sized scarf and tear through half a dozen crossword puzzles. But now, every time I close my eyes, I see either a swirling pattern of wool or a black and white interweaving maze.

#8 Across, six letters: *A foolish woman who thinks that sharing a couple of dinners with a man means that she knows him.*

I think we all know the answer to that one.

When I finally hear the bolt unlatch, I'm in the bathroom flossing my teeth. Not because I'm about to sleep or anything. Just because it's something to do and I've exhausted all my other options.

I drop the floss mid-swipe and rush into the room.

But it's not Uri who walks in.

It's a petite maid with dirty blonde hair pulled back so tight I can almost see her scalp. She's carrying a tray of food and, despite the mouthwatering scent emanating from underneath the silver cloche, my heart sinks with disappointment.

“Who are you?”

It comes out sounding a lot harsher than I intended. She stops short halfway to the kitchen. “I'm Svetlana, ma'am.”

My gaze flickers towards the door. It's closed but I saw her walk in. She certainly didn't lock it behind her.

This is the opportunity I've been waiting for!

“Oh. Right. You could just set that in the kitchen. Thanks.”

Svetlana nods and disappears around the corner without the slightest bit of suspicion. I don't waste any time racing for the door. I'm vaguely aware that, even if I manage to clear the basement, I'll have security cameras and security guards to deal with. Probably, like, a moat filled with hungry alligators and sharks with laser beams on their forehead, too. But I'll cross that bridge when I come to it.

I pull the door open. It's heavy and I'm weak, so it's a struggle—but when it finally opens, I get one glorious glimpse of freedom...

Before I find myself face-to-face with a minotaur.

Well, not literally a minotaur. But he might as well be. He's a huge, hulking security guard, big enough to block the entire staircase.

“Um—hi.”

His face does not change. “Good evening, ma'am.”

What's with the "ma'am" business?

"How're you doing?"

Still stone-faced. "Well."

"So, yeah, your, um, boss told me that I could head upstairs whenever and grab a book from the library." I don't know if he even has a library but let's face it, any house as big as this one is bound to have a library, right? "So if you wouldn't mind letting me—"

"Write down the book you want and I'll get it for you."

I narrow my eyes. "I don't have a book in mind. I want to browse. Your boss said he didn't have a problem with it."

His nose twitches. It's the most expressive thing he's done yet. "Actually, my boss told me to stay alert because you would undoubtedly try and escape the moment the maid was inside."

I grit my teeth and dig my heels in. "Let me pass!"

"No. Sorry."

"You're an ass. Just like your boss."

I twist around and make a show of slamming the door in his face. Of course, this particular door is too heavy to be slammed. So instead, he stands and watches solemnly as I put all my strength behind pushing the door shut slowly.

It takes a minute. An endless, excruciating minute.

Smooth, Alyssa. Real smooth.

The moment I turn into the basement, I scream at the top of my lungs, letting my frustration fly free. It's not until I'm done screaming that I realize Svetlana is standing a few feet away, looking positively rattled by my outburst.

A blush creeps up my cheeks. "I'm not crazy."

Now, why did I go and say that? Everyone knows that only a crazy person insists that they're not crazy.

"I know, ma'am."

"My name is Alyssa."

She gives me a self-conscious smile and shuffles in place. I realize I'm blocking her path to the door but I don't care.

"Svetlana, can I ask you something, woman to woman?"

Svetlana gulps nervously. I'm worried for a second that the gesture will rip her hair out at the roots, but she seems to be okay. "Okay, ma'am."

"I'm being held hostage here and I need help getting out."

Her cheeks flush red. "You're being held here for your own protection, ma'am."

Oh, no, don't tell me she drank the Kool-Aid, too.

"Your boss is lying. He's keeping me here under false pretenses. God knows why. Maybe he wants to make a coat of my skin. Maybe he wants to sell me off as a sex slave. I don't know the reason, but I'm guessing it's not good. So—"

"Ma'am..." Her voice is uneven but she powers through anyway. "I've worked for Mr. Bugrov for over twenty years. He has never hurt a woman, nor does he believe in sex slavery. I don't know why you're here, either, but I believe Mr. Bugrov when he says he's trying to keep you safe."

My mouth drops open. I really hadn't expected that much conviction, that much loyalty, that much faith from an employee.

For *Uri*.

Guess he pays well. Plus benefits.

"You're not gonna even try to help me escape?"

"You don't have to escape. I'm sure Mr. Bugrov will release you once it's safe." She inches closer to the exit. "Your dinner is on the kitchen island. If you need anything else, please let me know."

"How?" I demand. "I'm down here and you're up there!"

She points to a little red button beside the door. "Just press that button. It has a direct line to the maids' quarters."

"How very *Downton Abbey* of you all," I drawl bitterly.

Svetlana gives me one more apologetic smile and leaves. And once again, I'm all alone. Nothing to break the monotony of the silence apart from my own voice.

Another thing about myself I've decided I hate.

I end up back on the bed, writhing with all this anger that I don't have an outlet for. What would I say to him if he were standing in front of me right now?

How dare you?

What do you really want from me?

Do you get off on keeping me locked up in here, knowing you have all the control and I'm completely at your mercy?

That strikes a chord. Well, if *he's* getting off on this... why shouldn't I?

Before I can think twice about it, I empty the package that was meant for Elle onto the bed. My heart is in my throat, but I feel crazed, completely unmoored from my normal life. Nothing else is normal, so why should this be? Why should I be?

Why shouldn't I strip down naked and find out what a purple alien tentacle can do to a girl?

The toy is heavy in my hand, but somehow warm to the touch. It's crazy, duh—but I *feel* fucking crazy right now. And crazy needs crazy. I need something crazy, something extreme to distract from how I'm being forced to put my fate in the hands of a man I don't trust.

I settle down, legs parted, and touch the very tip of the toy to myself.

Immediate throb.

I ease the toy inside of me, and the throb becomes a painful ache.

I stop.

Is this how he keeps me in line? Am I so pathetic that a piece of silicone can keep me licking my lips in anticipation?

I push the toy in deeper, if only to prove to myself that I'm not weak. If I can take this, then I can take anything. I'll be able to survive him; I'll be able to survive *this*.

I'm thrumming with a weird sort of tension. I try to tune out the discomfort, but it still takes a couple of breaths before I start to relax. But even as I slip the big purple head inside of myself, I don't feel anything earth-shattering like the Eve's Garden ad copy promised.

It feels less sexual and more... gynecological.

Gritting my teeth, I try a little harder to concentrate on the task at hand. *Sexual pleasure*—that is the goal.

But my nether regions are dry and the dildo is no real substitute for a human male. Maybe bodily warmth is what I'm craving... Or maybe...

His face slides back into my head. Those broad shoulders. Those aquamarine eyes.

Oh God...

And just like that, my body starts feeling something. My legs start to tremble; my pussy starts to moisten.

Bing. Bing. Bing.

Sexual pleasure. As advertised, and then some.

I fall into the rhythm of it, moaning and breathing hard as I fuck myself with the purple alien tentacle. Wave after wave of pleasure washes over me, and I feel my body start to tighten.

I want to squeeze my eyes shut, to stop myself from seeing that I've really sunk this low, but I don't. I keep my eyes open and watch myself come.

Holy shit.

My body is trembling uncontrollably. My toes are curled so tight that they're cramping up.

When I finally come down from the high, I feel more alive than ever. I'm less hungry, less angry, less helpless than I was a few minutes ago.

What did... what did he do to me?

Somehow, he got to me without even being here.

I'm locked in Uri Bugrov's basement, he's nowhere to be found, and I *still* belong to him.

Pathetic.

URI

Lev sleeps like a wild animal.

Almost from the second his eyes close, he starts thrashing around the bed, kicking anything and everything in his vicinity. There are mornings I've walked into his room and found the pillows and covers jettisoned to every corner of the room. Broken bedposts aren't as rare as I'd like, either.

Even my California king isn't enough to accommodate both Lev and myself comfortably when he gets going. I get two kicks, one to the knee and one to the groin, before I throw my hands up in the air and retreat to my office.

I hadn't planned on falling asleep in bed next to Lev. He woke up around midnight, muttering about his basement and the only way to calm him back down was to get in bed next to him. Of course, I ended up falling asleep, too.

Rookie mistake. Now, I'm wide awake and craving something strong.

My eyes veer to the monitors hooked up to my desk. I decide to check in on Alyssa to see how she's doing.

I chose not to visit her at all today—purely because I realized how fucking badly I wanted to. I was tempted to walk down there every minute of every hour of the day. But that kind of shit cannot fly. I need to simply cut her from my system. Go cold turkey.

It doesn't help that I have video cameras installed in the basement. They were put in years ago so that I could keep an

eye on Lev from a distance. But they've come in uniquely handy in this particular instance.

I sit at my desk and turn the monitors on. The feed is blurry at first but then it focuses fast. The lights are still on so she's clearly—

I freeze, my eyes homing in on the bed.

Is she doing what I think she's doing?

She isn't just naked—she's splayed out on the bed, her legs parted to either side, her breasts bouncing gently in rhythm as she guides the big purple dildo in and out of her pussy.

There's not even a question of looking away. My eyes are glued to the screen and I might never look away again.

I'm mesmerized by the way those perky little tits of hers bounce every time she shoves the dildo inside of her. Her pussy is on full display but as good as the feed quality is, it's still not clear enough for me. Sure, I can see her lips swallow the dildo every time she slides it through—but I want more.

I want to *smell* her.

I want to *taste* her.

I want to eject that fucking toy out of the window and plow into her myself.

God help me, I'm jealous of a plastic dildo.

Her blonde hair is fanned out across the pillows. Her eyes are closed and her chest heaves with every thrust. My cock throbs so painfully that I have to white-knuckle the edge of my desk just to stop from keeling over.

It's not technically sex if you get yourself off, is it? I'm not breaking my rule. This is permissible.

Unzipping myself, I pull out my dick and start pumping hard. There's no slow build here. Not tonight. I'm so horny that I feel as though I'm going to explode if I don't come soon.

Her mouth parts in what is without doubt a moan, but I can't hear it. Isn't there supposed to be an audio feed hooked up to this thing as well? Grinding my teeth wildly, I release myself

long enough to turn the volume on. It links up mid-moan and my cock jumps again.

“Ahh,” she murmurs. “My God, yes...”

She’s so much more relaxed than she was with me. There’s a sense that she feels freer, more comfortable. Uninhibited.

And I don’t like that one bit.

Where the hell was this brazen little *kiska* the other night when I fucked her on my dining table?

Sure, she’d moaned and writhed. She’d also come twice, if memory serves. But it was different. It isn’t until right this minute that I realize she was holding back. Or rather, *something* was holding her back.

Her body spasms as she nears the edge. I stop touching myself and focus all my attention on the monitor. Her lips part wider, her breasts shiver, her legs flail helplessly for a moment. And then—

“Ahh... Uri...”

My body floods with heat. There is no mistaking the name on her lips. *My* name. The satisfaction that races through my body completely washes out the annoyance.

Maybe she can be forgiven for holding back.

But not before I get my pound of flesh.

I’m acutely aware of how stupid this is when I tuck my erection back into my pants and stride out of my office. I should stop myself or, at the very least, come up with a plausible reason to burst in. But I have tunnel vision right now. The desire for conquest is so loud that it’s drowning out my sense of logic.

I was craving something strong...

She will suffice.

I’m going to walk in there and put that purple dildo to shame. I’m going to give her so many fucking orgasms that she won’t be able to hold back anymore. I’m going to release her from the shell she’s imprisoned herself in.

It's hard to think about the consequences as I walk the staircase down to the basement. It's even harder to remember that if I go through with this, Alyssa will be the only woman I've ever fucked twice.

Shit like that feels like an inconsequential detail right now.

I unlatch the bolt and rip the door open. I hear a gasp from the bed and then she's scrambling to cover herself up. At least I get a flash of her juicy ass before she pulls the cover sheet around her chest.

Her cheeks are flushed pink and the color has spilled onto her chest and arms. Her hair is a chaotic mess of wild curls and her breathing is coming in hot and hard. She's obviously caught off-guard by my presence but she's trying desperately to hide it behind a mask of indignation.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"I came to make sure you were alright. But I see now you're doing just fine."

She flushes an even darker shade of pink. "I... I was just hot and I wanted to sleep without any—"

"It must've slipped my mind to mention this earlier, but there are cameras in this room."

Her mouth snaps shut. Her eyes bulge. The silence stretches on for a while before she speaks. "Did you see—?"

"I. Saw. Everything." I let a grin spread across my face. "It was quite the show."

"It wasn't *meant* to be a show," she snaps furiously. "You weren't supposed to see that!"

I walk over to the armchair and twist it around to face her bed. "I'm glad I did," I tell her as I sit down. "Your naked body was meant to be spread out across an eighty-inch screen in HD."

She bites her bottom lip, which only makes me think of all the places I would like to bite *her*. "You were watching me on an eighty-inch screen in HD?"

"No." I shake my head regretfully. "Which is why I'm here."

She pulls the sheet tighter around her shoulders but despite the obvious show of discomfort, I get the feeling that she's not mad that I'm here. "You need to leave."

I arch a brow. "You want me to go?"

She nods fiercely. Her blonde hair cascades over one shoulder. That slice of bare skin across her collarbone is every bit as erotic as anything else I've seen tonight.

"If you really want me to leave, I will. I won't force you to do anything you don't want to do."

She glowers at me. "Except force me to stay here."

"Entirely different thing. You don't get a say in that because you don't know the risks involved. When it comes to your safety, staying here is in your best interests."

She licks her lips. "I have a feeling staying away from *you* would be in my best interests, too."

"Been lonely down here, have you, *narushitel?*"

"No. *No*. You don't get to lock me down here, then invade my privacy by *spying* on me and then make fun of me for it!"

"Make fun of you?" I repeat with shock. "*Kiska*, I'm trying to compliment you. I believe I've made that clear."

She's blushing all over again and trying so hard to hide it. She turns her back on me for a moment, which works well for her purposes, because I'm immediately distracted by the outline of her ass pressing through the thin sheet.

"When it comes to you, nothing is clear."

My jaw clenches. "Then I'll be blunt from now on. I didn't come down here to check on you, Alyssa. I came down here to watch you come again. Now, turn around and look at me."

Her spine straightens out and her shoulders stiffen but she turns around all the same. Those pretty blue eyes aren't making direct eye contact but they nip back and forth as though they're scared to settle.

I cock my legs in a figure-four and nod approvingly. "That's a good girl. Now, drop the sheet."

Her eyes flare and she grips the sheet a little tighter. There's a moment when I think she's going to refuse me and kick me out. Then, before I can decide just how far I'm willing to push her...

She lets go.

The sheet flutters to the floor, bunching up around her feet. She's clearly nervous and self-conscious but she doesn't try to cover herself up with her hands. She lets me admire the curve of her hips, the length of her legs, the glistening wetness of her desire.

The nagging voice at the back of my head is trying hard to caution me, but I'm way too far gone for that. I'm done resisting this. I'm done denying myself. Why should I, when we both want the same thing?

All I need is one more taste of her and that'll be it. I can put this feeling to bed and continue with my life.

But I *do* need one more taste.

"Now, pick another toy."

She glances over at the bed, where the rest of the toys are spread out. She hesitates only for a second before she stands and strides around, giving me a perfect view of her profile. I resist the urge to pull out my cock and take her the way I want to take her. If this is to be our last time, I'm going to make it count.

When she turns around, I see that she's picked a small pink clit stimulator. "Good choice. Now... get on the bed and use it for me."

Her lips part. A shiver runs over her body but from the look in her eye, I can tell it's got nothing to do with nerves this time.

"What are you going to do?" she asks softly.

I arch an eyebrow. "I'm going to watch you fall apart."

ALYSSA

This is the closest I've ever come to an out-of-body experience.

There's no other way to describe this feeling nestled in the center of my chest. I've never felt so emboldened, so willing, so ready to do something completely out of my comfort zone.

I suppose Uri and I having already had sex helps. But it's not just that we've crossed that line; it's about all the lines we're crossing now.

It's that I'm so lonely. It's how, even though he's stayed away, he's been keeping one eye on me the whole time. Maybe it's as simple as he doesn't trust me and he wanted to make sure I was following his ridiculous rules. But a part of me wonders if maybe he's been watching me because he *likes* watching me.

He definitely *looks* like he does.

Especially when I sit back on the bed, positioning myself right in front of him so that he has a clear, unadulterated view of every last inch of me.

I can see the outline of his erection pushing through the front of his pants but he doesn't unzip himself. He doesn't so much as move. He just sits there, still as a statue, and watches me as though I'm enough all on my own.

As I turn on the clit stimulator, though, I hear a low rumble. For a moment, I think it's the air conditioning—then I realize it's Uri himself, growling under his breath like a caveman. And just like that, I'm desperate for him to touch me. The

thought of his hands roaming and claiming all over my body is the image I use as I put the stimulator to work.

I didn't think that having someone watch me masturbate would be this much of a turn-on. But strangely, that's exactly what it is. Even when my eyes are closed, I can feel him watching, drinking in every move I make.

I've never liked being the center of attention.

Then again, I've never been a billionaire mob boss's prisoner before, either.

First time for everything, I guess.

As I press the stimulator harder against my clit, I peek open one eye so I can see him.

And *boy*, is that a move.

Everything feels immediately amplified. Ten times as intense. I guide the stimulator up and down, working my clit frantically. It feels good, but it's not giving me what I want. It's not giving me the heat or intensity *he's* giving me.

And that's just with the strength of his gaze.

If he dared to touch me...

My lips part and a loud, strangled moan escapes. My eyes close for a second, but the moment they're open again, they latch onto Uri. He's still not touching himself but he is gripping the arms of the chair so hard that I'm wondering how much longer the wood can last.

His name is on the tip of my tongue, and I know without even having to ask that it would shatter the very last bit of his restraint. I can't allow myself to say it, though. It was one thing when I thought I was alone. It's a whole other thing to call out to him while he's in the room. So I bite down on my lips to keep those two dangerous syllables from slipping free.

Frustrated, I drop the stimulator to the side and start using my fingers. When it comes to sex, my experience is limited. I would go so far as to say my skills are limited, too. But when it comes to self-pleasure...

Ya girl knows her shit.

I arch my back and push two fingers inside myself. I have no control of my moans at this point. They're flying free one after the next, encouraged by the way Uri's eyes flare every time I let one rip.

His knuckles are bone-white and his erection is twice as big as it was a moment ago.

It's the first time I can ever remember thinking, *I want him on top of me. His weight, his scent, his skin... all of it.*

My first boyfriend once told me that I looked like I was smelling a rotten egg every time he came on my belly. When we broke up, I told him that a rotten egg smelled a hell of a lot better than his cum.

Needless to say, we didn't stay friends.

I can't imagine that there's any part of Uri I wouldn't crave, though. And the thought of him pulling out of me and erupting on my stomach...

"Mmm..."

"Are you gonna come for me, *narushitel*?"

I don't have the spare brain cells to remember what that little nickname means, but honestly, part of me kinda likes that. It just means *me*. And coming from his lips, in that raspy, Russian-accented growl? That's a clit stimulator all on its own.

"Yes!" I whine. "Yes. Yes. Yes!"

I orgasm with my eyes on him, drinking in his reaction, waiting for him to reach down, to free his cock and touch himself. But he doesn't. Not even as my body writhes and explodes. He may not have touched me but we both know he's the one responsible for every second of my pleasure.

My hands drop; my fingers actually feel a little sore. And as they do, a shadow falls over me, cutting the light in half.

Uri is standing by the edge of the bed, watching me with a hunter's gaze. And yet I've never felt safer. I've never felt calmer.

I've never wanted a man to touch me more.

I sit up and reach for the buckle of his pants. He doesn't stop me, so I unbuckle him and pull them down. My mouth fills with saliva as I pull his boxer briefs down next.

This is new, too.

Blowjobs have never been my thing. I used to find them tedious and, quite frankly, a little gross. But now that I'm faced with the most beautiful cock I've ever seen, the idea of putting it in my mouth not only feels natural—it feels *necessary*.

I engulf him in my mouth and start sucking. I have no idea if I'm doing this right but I figure that dedication will take me pretty far. So I put my hands on his hips and suck him as deep into my mouth as I can take without actually gagging.

My heart is pounding and so is my vagina. Both are practically screaming for attention. *His* attention, specifically. But I don't want to take him out of my mouth. I kinda wanna see how far I can take this. If I keep going, will he come in my mouth?

The fact that the very thought has my heart fluttering harder is strange and out of character. Who am I? No—who is he *making* me?

I'm settling into the blowjob when Uri suddenly pulls out of my grasp and backs away. The first thing I feel is disappointment. Then nerves.

Was I not good enough? Was he bored? Did I hurt him with my eagerness?

Before I can ask any of those questions, he shoves me back onto the bed and I bounce pitifully in place. I get about a millisecond to keep wondering what I did wrong before he's on top of me. He steadies me with his body and I draw in a breath as his heat slides over mine.

This kind of thing would have had my skin crawling a month ago. But right now, it's making my toes curl. It's making the wetness drip down my thighs.

“Uri...” I gasp as my lips latch onto the side of his neck.

He snarls hungrily as his erection presses firmly against my thigh. I part my legs a little wider, hoping that he takes that as the invitation it's meant to be. But he still holds himself away.

"Mm, eager little *narushitel*..." he snarls, nipping at my ear. "Do you want me to fuck you?"

He dips a little lower until he's at eye level with my breasts. He squeezes one, pushing my nipple up high before he circles it with his tongue.

God help me.

I'm aware of how needy I'm being, trying to push my hips against his, moaning and writhing and trying to tempt him into taking me the way I want him to. I'm practically a porn star at this point.

But even my best attempts don't seem to have an effect on him.

Well, that's not true. His eyes are blazing with lust. I don't know much about men, but I know lust when I see it. I know he wants me but for some reason, he's holding back.

He sucks my nipple into his mouth again and I groan. I can feel his cock at my lips and—

I gasp when he pushes into me. Not his cock—his fingers.

"You're so wet for me, Alyssa. You're fucking dripping all over my hand."

I was right about one thing: he is gonna kill me—just not in the way I thought.

"Uri!" It comes out sounding breathless and angry and frustrated all at the same time.

He raises his head and chuckles cruelly. "What's wrong, pretty *kiska*? Something bothering you?"

"Stop teasing me!"

Another dark chuckle. "Is that what you want?" he asks, rubbing his cock against my slit. He's still not inside me, but another inch, two maybe, and he will be.

“Yes. Yes... *aah...*”

He grabs my hands and pins them down on either side of my face. Then he presses himself down against me. “If you want me to do this, I want something from you.”

I should've known there'd be strings attached. The proper answer here is “hell no.” I should be pushing him off me and drawing a firm line in the sand. But instead, I nod feverishly. “What do you want?”

Real empowered there, girl. Nice work. You just set feminism back a hundred years.

“I want you to let go,” he whispers into my ear. “I want you to give yourself over to me. If I feel you holding back, there *will* be punishment.”

My thighs are wet at this point. I'm not sure if I'm more excited for the sex or the promise of what comes if I disobey him. I can barely move. My legs are jelly and my arms are locked in place. There's nothing I can do and nowhere for me to run.

And still, I don't feel scared.

Not in the slightest.

I mean to say, “Okay, I'll let go,” even though I'm not fully sure what he means by that. But what I really say is, “You can have all of me.”

If I'd been in better control of my faculties, I'd be cringing for sure. As it stands, I'm too weak and trembly to care about silly, abstract things like sexual power and politics.

“Good girl,” he whispers.

Two words have never sounded sweeter.

And that's when he shoves himself inside me. My mouth drops from the sheer size of him. I remember the sensation in every cell of my body and yet somehow, that night on the dining room table feels like such a long time ago.

I cry out as he fucks me as though he has a point to prove. His hands stay clamped tight on my wrists like living cuffs. His

jaw is clenched tight, his eyes focused. And then suddenly, he grabs my chin and shoves my head to the side, breaking the eye contact. His lips come down on my neck, scraping and biting and claiming.

“Fucking hell, Alyssa...”

Hearing him utter my name like *that* as he fucks me isn't something I'm expecting. Maybe that's why it makes me feel like *I'm* the one in control all of a sudden.

I may be pinned to the bed. He may be the one calling the shots and making the rules.

But *I'm* the one making him unravel. I'm the one he's been craving.

His lips brush over mine for a second, making my body erupt with tingles. My back arches as I come, moaning in his ear the entire time. I clench and spasm and bear down with every inch of me and the motion milks Uri's orgasm free, too.

“Goddammit,” he growls as his hands tighten around my wrists and he keeps his hips pressed flush against mine while tremors rip through him. “You're going to be the fucking death of me.”

The moment he's emptied himself inside me, he rolls over, freeing me from the prison of his body. I'm gonna need a minute or ten to recover so I can remember how to do stuff like breathe and swallow and speak words.

Not him, though. Before I can even turn to him, he's up and out of the bed. His name is on my tongue, but I bite it back. If he doesn't break the silence, then neither will I.

It doesn't stop me from hoping, though.

He gathers up his clothes, gets dressed without ceremony, and then, without so much as a glance in my direction, he strides out of the basement.

He leaves me with his cum running down my legs and the knowledge that, for the second time in a week, we've neglected to use protection.

I clean myself up before collapsing back onto the bed, my head swimming with emotions I'm not capable of processing yet.

The penultimate thought I have before I fall asleep that night is, *Is he watching me?*

The last thought is, *I hope so.*

URI

“Boo!”

I don't react as Polly jumps out from behind the door frame of my office in a half-assed attempt to make me jump. “Don't do that,” I drawl. “You'll hurt yourself.”

She sighs and slumps her way in. “It's so unsatisfying trying to scare you. Even when I catch you off-guard, I get literally zero reaction.”

“That's because you didn't actually scare me. I heard you shuffle over there three minutes ago.”

Her sparkling hazel eyes narrow into slits. She's the only one of us that inherited our mother's eyes. Sometimes, I love her more because of it. Other days, it's hard to look directly at her.

She pouts and crosses her arms over her chest. “You're an ass.”

“You're not the first woman to say that to me.”

“Ew! I don't wanna hear about your conquests.”

I scowl. “That's not what I meant.”

Polly raises one eyebrow high on her forehead; that's a move she inherited from Nikolai. “Didn't you?” I roll my eyes and grab a hold of her. Giggling, she steps into my arms and hugs me tight. “It's good to see you, Uri. Missed you.”

I kiss the top of her head. It feels like she gets taller every month. “Missed you, too.” I pull back a little so that I can take a good look at her. “Did you cut your hair again?”

“Sure did. I’m hoping to work up the courage to go fully buzzed soon.”

“Why?”

She shrugs. “Because I refuse to play into the patriarchy’s hands by growing out my hair and wearing short skirts and behaving like a ‘good girl.’ Fuck that.”

There’s an inverse relationship between the length of her hair and how often she says “fuck,” apparently. I’ve decided to ignore it. Snapping at her about her choice of language is Nikolai’s domain, not mine.

“Good,” I growl. “We’ll dress you in a parka instead. Keep the boys at school from staring too long.”

She laughs and pinches me in the ribs. “I didn’t mean that literally. I like my short skirts.”

Mussing her hair, I ask, “Have you seen Lev yet?”

“No.” Her eyebrows immediately flatten out and her mouth turns down at the edges. I only ever see that look on her when she’s worried about Lev. And she’s worried about him a *lot* these days. “I ran into Svetlana earlier and she said he was having a bad day.”

More like “days,” plural.

“He’s fine. He’s just going through an adjustment right now.”

“Um, yeah, duh—of course he is. You’re not letting him into the basement.” She tilts her chin down to give me what she calls her “serious stare” and somehow, *I* end up feeling like the younger sibling. “I was also informed that *I* had to stay clear of the basement, too. Care to explain?”

I can’t get pissed at Svetlana—those are my orders she’s carrying out. “There’s been a... rat infestation down there.”

Polly’s eyebrows float way up. “Is that a euphemism?”

“Polina.”

“Don’t you *Polina* me. I’m not a baby anymore, you know. And I’m not Lev, either. I know when you’re making a lame excuse.”

“Then you also know when I’m withholding information for your own good.”

“Fine.” She grimaces. “I guess.”

I steer her towards the dining room, where dinner is being set out. This room didn’t always have heavy curtains, but it was the only way to coax Lev into sharing a meal with us once in a while. Even when it was dark out, he preferred that the floor-to-ceiling windows were covered. He got agitated if he saw something move in the dark and he didn’t know what it was.

I don’t blame him.

“Is Nikolai joining us for dinner today?”

“Not today. He’s busy.”

She nods like she doesn’t care, but I can tell she’s disappointed by the way she forces a smile onto her face. “What should we do tonight after dinner? Pillow fight? Movie marathon? Couple rounds of poker?”

“You know what we’ll end up doing,” I grumble.

We both look at each other and say at the same time, “Video games.”

The simple fact of the matter is that, most of the time, our lives revolve around Lev and his needs. But instead of resenting him for it, she just loves him harder. Even if sometimes that means loving him from afar.

Both of us turn to the open doorway when we hear a door slam. A few minutes later, Lev pokes his head around the corner. Polina has always been a *why-shake-hands-when-you-can-hug* kind of girl. But with Lev, she doesn’t so much as take a step towards him. She knows better.

“Hey, buddy,” she greets. “How’re you doing?”

“Hi, Polly.”

She smiles wider. “Happy to see me?”

He nods uncertainly. He’s two heads taller than she is and twice as big around the middle. But he’s looking at her like a spooked cat. It’s not that he’s uncomfortable or wary around

Polly; it's just that he needs time to adjust to being around anyone new, especially when he hasn't been for a while. I do the mental calculation—it's been almost seven weeks since Polly came home for the weekend. For Lev, that might as well be years.

“Can I get a hug?” He shakes his head vigorously and she just smiles harder. “How about a high five then?”

He glances at me. Then at Polly. Then back at me again. “I'm hungry.”

He walks around Pol and sits down in a chair that scrapes across the floor like nails on a chalkboard. I give her shoulder a little squeeze. “Just give him some time.”

She forces another smile that doesn't quite reach her eyes. “I should come home more often.”

“You can come home whenever you want to. You know that.”

We sit down to dinner. A cheeseburger for Lev and meatloaf with roasted veggies for Polly and myself. Lev picks at his burger, deconstructing it first before he so much as takes a bite. He examines each mouthful carefully before he eats it.

Polly tries to engage him several times but he either acts like he doesn't hear her or he just mumbles to himself. When she starts getting frustrated, I pull her into a conversation of our own.

“Tell me about school.”

She rolls her eyes and sighs melodramatically. “It's been a shitshow. Danielle has a thing for Peter but Peter's totally into Hannah. Pretty sure Hannah bats for the other team, though, 'cause I saw her checking out Kaitlyn in the showers last Friday.”

I snort on a sip of my red wine. “Sorry I asked.”

She giggles and Lev recoils in his seat at the unexpected noise. “My bad, Lev,” she mumbles, but he doesn't make eye contact with either one of us.

“But Hannah can get fucked, anyway. She's a bitch and I want her to stop picking on my friends.”

Nikolai likes to say that Polly collects strays. Anyone sad, broken, lost, or lonely, Polly takes them under her wing and tries to protect them.

Nikolai says it's because she's a born leader. I think it's because of Lev.

"If she doesn't, just beat the shit out of her. She won't come near you or your friends ever again." When I glance towards her, she's staring at me with an amused smile on her face. "What?"

"You realize that no normal person, parent, or guardian would give a teenager that advice, right?"

I shrug. "We're not like other people."

She slides back against her seat. "You don't have to tell me that twice."

"Basement!" Both Polly and I whip around in Lev's direction. He's still not looking at either one of us but he's wringing his hands together anxiously. "I want my basement."

"I told you, Lev: it's being sprayed for rodents. You just have to wait a little—"

He jackknives out of his chair so fast that it falls backwards. Abandoning his half-eaten burger, he darts out of the dining room. Polly is halfway out of her seat when I stop her.

"Leave him. He needs space."

She falls back into her seat but her smile is gone. Those hazel eyes of hers are pinched at the corners and filled with disappointment. "Sometimes, I forget how... how bad it gets with him."

"He'll be fine."

"No, he won't," she retorts curtly. "He won't be *fine*, Uri. He's always gonna be like this. Suspicious of everyone, terrified of change, obsessed with everything familiar..."

"It's going to be okay."

"How can you say that?"

“Because I’m going to make sure it is. I’ll look after him, Polly. I’ll look after all of you.”

She sighs and sinks into her chair. “You need a life, Uri.”

“So you keep saying.”

“Because you don’t listen.”

I give her a playful punch on the arm. “This is not something you need to worry about, *printsessa*. Just focus on yourself, your life; I’ll handle the rest.”

She doesn’t look particularly comforted. “Are you going to tell me what’s really going on down in the basement?”

“Nothing I can’t handle.”

I say it with confidence, but the truth is, I’m not so sure anymore. When I first locked Alyssa in the basement, I felt in control.

Now? Not so much.

Fucking her last night was a mistake. And fucking her like *that* was piling one mistake on top of the next.

But when I was in the moment, it was impossible to stop. I felt like an addict getting his fix after years of sobriety. Everything about her felt addictive. The way she moaned. The way she moved. The way she called my name.

It was enough to make me look in her eyes while I fucked her. I almost fell headfirst into that pit of quicksand. But I’d put an end to it fast.

And yet...

Here I am, jonesing for another fix.

Just one more hit. One more taste. I tell myself this will be the last time—but I told myself that the last time, too, and look how that’s turned out.

Fuck. I’ve really boxed myself into a corner. And now that Polly is back, there isn’t any room for error.

I need to stay far away from the unassuming little siren in my basement. More importantly, I need to get her out of my

basement and off my property.

Once Boris Sobakin is no longer a threat, the little *narushitel* is gone.

All I have to do now is find a way to be okay with that.

ALYSSA

I'm half-awake when I hear movement just outside the basement door.

It has to be either Svetlana or Uri, but neither one makes that much noise before they enter. And neither one has ever visited me in the middle of the night. Thankfully, I'm wearing pajamas—the real unsexy kind, primarily for Uri's lack of benefit. He can spy on me all he wants, but he'll have to use his imagination from now on. My body is all caps OFF-LIMITS where he's concerned.

Especially after the way he left... what was it... two nights ago now?

It still eats at me. Was it so hard to say a simple goodnight? I mean, my God, I'd have settled for a “thanks for the bang, toots.”

But it feels stupid to want even that much. What did he think, that I was going to become all needy and clingy and beg him to stay with me? Although...

I *had* begged him to fuck me.

But that was... um... that was because—

Actually—what *was* that?!

I've spent the last two nights ruminating on what the hell got into me. Every time I try to get to the bottom of it, I get distracted by the replay that's been circulating in my head since the moment he walked out the door.

It was the loneliness. That had to be it. I was just craving human company and he appeared and I completely lost my head and just went with it.

Yeah. Sure. I'm gonna stick with that explanation.

The lock smacks open loudly and I jerk upright. That's definitely not Uri or Svetlana. My eyes adjust to the darkness fast and I catch sight of the silhouette entering the basement. Although "skulking" would be the better word.

Goosebumps flood my skin and my heartbeat rises rapidly. Whoever this person is, he's *big*. And the way he's moving around makes me wish I had a can of pepper spray by the bed. As it stands, all I've got are two fluffy pillows. Not much good in the self-defense department.

His walk is confused. He fumbles around the space as though he's not sure where to go. Then he turns towards the bed. It's probably a dumb move on my part but I throw my hand out and turn on the moon lamp on the bedside table. The basement fills with a soft, yellow glimmer that casts stars onto the ceiling.

"Ack!" the man yells, stumbling back so hard that he loses his footing and ends up on his ass on the floor.

I jump to my feet, making sure to keep the bed between us. For some unknown reason, I grab a pillow and hold it in front of me like a shield.

"Who are you?" I demand.

The man buries his face in his hands and starts rocking back and forth. He's not making any attempt to stand or move. He just sits on the cold cement floor and keeps swinging around, his face hidden behind his palms.

What the hell is going on?

I can hear the man mumbling into his hands but I don't understand a word he's saying. I creep around the bed slowly as my fear is replaced with pity.

He's still mumbling fast but I can't distinguish one word from the other. He's sitting like a child, his legs pulled together and

spread out in front of him. I feel my heart twist. It seems like he's way more afraid than I am right now.

Then I hear a sob. More mumbling. A sniff. The shaking doesn't stop. The rocking gets more pronounced. Now, I'm not scared *of* him; I'm scared *for* him.

"Hey, I... I'm sorry... I didn't mean to scare you." The rocking gets a little slower so I continue, making sure to talk slow and soft. "You just caught me by surprise." As I inch a little closer, I realize that something about him is familiar to me. "My name is Alyssa. What's yours?"

He responds by lifting his head a little. Then he parts two fingers just enough to allow one eye to peek out from between them.

And it dawns on me... I'm not dealing with an adult here. I mean, he may *look* like a full-grown man, but he definitely isn't that.

I give him a friendly smile, then I wave. The one eye that I can see goes still but he keeps it fixed on me. So I sit down opposite him, keeping a healthy distance between us for his comfort, and I cover my face, too, mimicking his body language. Then I peek out at him by parting two of my fingers, the same way he just did.

He drops his hands a little. I catch the top half of his face first. *I've definitely seen him before.* He's staring at me wide-eyed, mouth open, confused and wary and skittish.

I pull my hands down, too. He immediately hides his face again. I do the same. When he peeks out at me, I follow suit.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

And then, I hear something that makes my heart lift.

He *giggles*. It's loud and sudden and childlike. And it clearly takes him off-guard, too, because he flinches and then slaps a hand over his mouth.

I laugh softly and give him a little shrug. His cheeks blossom with color but he drops his hands altogether.

Oh my God.

I see it now.

This is the guy who plays football on the front lawn with Uri every now and then. He's at least six feet tall, broad-shouldered and muscly. He has to be... twenty, twenty-one?

Which is why I can be forgiven for being so shocked to be met with this personality.

A child trapped in an adult's body. It sends a weird surge of emotion rippling through me, leaving more goosebumps in its wake.

I lift my hand and wave gingerly. He doesn't return the gesture but his fingers twitch like he's thinking about it. "I'm Alyssa," I say again. But this time, I don't ask for anything in return.

He stares at me unblinkingly, his eyes running up and down my body. Then he wraps his arms around his legs and rests his chin on his knees. I do the same. I catch a glimpse of a smile.

He pushes one foot forward. I do the same.

He scratches behind his ear. I do the same.

"You're copying me," he accuses with another giggle. His words are childlike in their innocence but his voice is so grown up. Deep and masculine. It doesn't quite fit together.

"I guess I am."

He pulls his legs in tighter as his eyes keep flitting up and down my body. If he had been a quote-unquote "normal" twenty-something, I might have been insulted by his brazen objectification. But in this case, I know he's not checking me out. What he's doing is *sizing* me up.

"I'm sorry I scared you earlier. I didn't mean to."

He frowns. "It's not safe here."

That feels like a bucket of ice water. Is he trying to warn me about Uri? Has he been hurt by Uri?

No. It can't be. I've *seen* them together. Sure, I've watched from a distance, but body language is hard to deny. It's hard to fake, too.

“What do you mean?” I ask, keeping my tone as calm as possible.

“The rat spray. It’s poisonous.” Again, I suppress a shiver of unease. What is he talking about? Is there something going on that I’m not aware of? He turns his nose up to the ceiling. “But... I can’t smell anything.”

“What are you trying to smell?”

“The rat spray. To get rid of the rats.”

“There are no rats here.”

He starts rocking back and forth again. It’s not as pronounced as the last time, but it’s an easy tell. Still, I have no idea what about my statement has upset him. “There *are* rats,” he insists in a harsh mumble. “Uri *said*.”

Ah.

“Oh! Of course. That’s right,” I say, slapping my palm against my forehead. “How could I forget? There were rats but Uri took care of them.”

The rocking slows and his eyes home in on me. They’re blue, too, but a different blue than Uri’s. Lighter, more subdued. “Why are you here?”

“Because—” If I’m reading him right, I deduce that Uri means a lot to him. The very idea of Uri lying to him nearly spun him into anxiety. “—I needed help. I needed a place to hide out for a bit and Uri told me I would be safe here.”

“It *is* safe here. Except for the rats.”

“Right. Except for the rats.”

“He didn’t tell me that you were down here.” His brow furrows. The rocking starts up again. “He didn’t tell me.”

“That’s my fault. I told him not to tell anyone. I was scared and I didn’t want anyone to know.”

He bites his bottom lip. “Oh.”

I look around the space, seeing it in a new light. “This place is amazing. I love it here. It’s really cool.”

The rocking stops and a slow smile spreads over his face. “Me, too.”

“Is that your video game collection in the corner?”

He nods. “Yeah.”

“Wow.”

His smile gets a little wider. “You wanna play?”

“I don’t know how. Will you teach me?”

He nods again, but not like an adult would nod. His head bobs up and down fiercely. Grinning, he launches himself up off the ground and I follow along. His size is even more obvious when he’s standing, but he stays hunched and cautious like he needs to be ready to flee at any moment.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” His cheeks go red. It’s nice to know that I’m not the only one who suffers from a blushing affliction.

“Lev.”

I smile. “Is that your name?”

“Yes.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“You’re very pretty.”

He says it as soft as a whisper, but I hear it clearly. I give him a warm smile. “Thank you, Lev. And thank you for letting me use your basement. I promise I’ll give it back as soon as I can, okay?”

He wrings his hands together and nods. Then he gestures for me to follow him and bounds over to his video games.



We play games into the wee hours of the morning.

We don’t exchange a single word the whole time, but strangely, I can feel him relaxing with each passing hour.

Once I've lost the twentieth game in a row to him, he puts his controller down. "You're really bad at this."

I laugh. "You're right. I *am* really bad at this. But you know what I'm better at?"

"What?"

"French toast. Do you want some?"

His eyebrows pull together and he shakes his head. "Too soggy."

"Ah. What *would* you like to eat then?"

"Cornflakes."

"Perfect! I'm great at making cornflakes, too."

My joke clearly goes over his head because he doesn't even crack a smile. "You are?"

I nod. "Come on, you can watch me make them."

He follows me into the kitchen and watches carefully as I pull out two bowls, two spoons and the half-eaten bag of cornflakes that's sitting in the fridge. I pour in the cereal, add the milk, and push a bowl towards him.

"Ta-da! Gourmet."

He stares at me, then at his bowl, and finally at mine. "Wow. You really *can* make cereal."

My heart shudders. I know I should laugh but I really just want to cry. No, what I really want to do is hug him. I would, too, if I didn't suspect that he would be completely freaked out by any sort of physical contact between us. He's made sure to keep at least a few feet of space between us at all times. I'm not gonna cross that line until he does.

He takes a big spoonful; a trickle of milk slides down the side of his mouth. "It's delicious."

"Thanks, Lev. You're the only one who appreciates my cooking."

"Uri would like it, too," he insists. "Sometimes, when I can't sleep, we sit in the kitchen and eat cereal together."

Oh God, don't tell me that. I don't need another reason to like Uri. God knows I have enough as it is. Of course, I have just as many reasons to hate him. But somehow, that latter list isn't as compelling or as convincing as you'd think.

Damn those pheromones.

"That sounds fun."

Lev nods. "I like it because it's really quiet at night. And it's dark. And all the blinds are down."

Well, that explains why this basement has no windows. I can't even be mad at it now. "I used to do the same thing with my sister," I admit. "Except we used to eat pizza and ice cream and cookies."

"You have a sister?"

"Yes," I answer before thinking. Then it hits me: I *had* a sister. I grab a hold of my Z link instantly, trying to push down the sadness I've just unearthed. The bruise on my heart that won't go away no matter how many times I poke it.

"I have a sister, too," he explains. "And two brothers."

"And Uri is one?"

He nods and shovels another spoonful of cereal into his mouth. "He's my best friend, too."

There it goes again—my heart, shuddering with emotion that I really don't want to be feeling right now. Or ever. At least not for Uri Bugrov.

"But don't tell Nikolai or Polly," he adds, suddenly mortified.

"I won't. Pinky swear." I offer him my pinky to make good on my promise, but he looks at me like I've sprouted another head. Sheepishly, I let my hand fall. "Sorry. We, er... we don't have to pinky swear."

"Uh, what is that?" he asks after a long silence. "Pink-ee swear?"

"Oh. Well, it just means it's an unbreakable promise. Once you've linked fingers, that's it. You can't break your promise no matter what."

His mouth drops and his eyebrows rise. “Really?”

“Really.”

He looks down at his hand and then back at me. “I... I wanna do it.”

My heart lifts. “Of course.” I wait until he’s lifted his hand before I lift mine. I have to lean onto the center island in order to reach him. Then I guide my pinky around his and we lock onto one another.

I can feel him tremble but he seems calm. “There,” I say with satisfaction. “Now, that promise is unbreakable.”

He grins the widest I’ve ever seen. “Cool.” I giggle softly as he pushes his empty bowl towards me. “Can you make me some more cornflakes?”

“Coming right up.”

As I fill up his bowl again, it occurs to me that Lev might be just the opportunity I’ve been waiting for. A few pointed questions, a pinky swear or two, and I might be able to get him to do exactly what I want.

Namely: get me out of here.

He gets his basement back; I get my freedom back. Win-win, right?

My conscience doesn’t agree, though. The moment I consider it, the guilt washes over me. I glance over at Lev, who’s waiting eagerly for his second bowl. The innocence on his face makes me feel like a total scumbag for even thinking of using him that way. I can’t possibly put him in the middle of this. And I definitely can’t make a pawn out of him.

I slide the bowl over to Lev. “Here you go, Lev.”

He takes the bowl and shovels more cornflakes into his mouth. Every time I see some splatter, I feel the need to reach over and clean his face for him.

“You’re a really good cook,” he says between chews.

I suppress a laugh. “Thanks, Lev. I appreciate that.”

We spend the next few minutes talking about books. Well, *I* spend the next few minutes talking about books. Lev mostly just listens and eats, though he doesn't seem to mind me rambling. When he's done, his gaze starts flitting around the kitchen as though he's looking for something.

"You okay, Lev?"

"Do you think Uri will be mad at me?"

I frown. "Why would he be mad at you?"

"Because I came down here. He told me not to come down here."

"He probably just didn't want you to be upset. He was protecting you. And me."

"Because he's my big brother," Lev agrees. "That's his job. He says so all the time."

Oh, God. Another punch to the ovaries.

I'm having all the feels right now and that is not a good thing. "Well, he's right. It's important for siblings to look out for each other."

Lev frowns. "I don't look after him."

"You may not think so but I bet there's something you're doing for him, even if you don't know it." His frown gets even deeper and I can see on his face that I'm not making any sense to him. "I remember my sister used to get really stressed out before exams. So I used to give her a big hug right before she sat for the tests. Later, when we were older, she told me that those hugs helped her. I didn't know it at the time, but I did make a difference, no matter how small."

Lev shakes his head. "How can a hug help?"

I smile. "It's a physical gesture of love. It's a way of showing someone you care without actually saying it."

He starts oscillating on his stool. "I don't like hugs."

Of course he doesn't, you idiot. You couldn't have come up with another example?

“A hug isn’t the only way to show someone you care. There are tons of other ways. Like... sharing your video games, for example.”

Lev thinks about that. His spinning slows, then stops. “Oh.” His eyes go blank for a moment before they focus on me again. “I still don’t want Uri to be mad at me.”

“I’m sure he won’t—”

“I have to go.”

He jerks away from the island and leaves the kitchen so fast that I have to jog to keep up with him. He pulls the door open with ease but he pauses at the threshold.

“How long are you staying?” he asks without any eye contact.

“I’m not sure, Lev. But I promise to leave as soon as I can.”

He’s looking directly at the door frame, running his finger down the cool steel strip. “It’s okay. You can use my basement.”

I have to bite on my bottom lip to keep it from wobbling. “See? Now, I know you care about me.” He blushes. “Will you come and see me again, Lev?”

He nods silently and then bolts out the door.

It’s still early, so I get back in bed and go back to my usual pastime of staring at the ceiling. But this time, I’m smiling.

URI

It's four in the morning when I turn on the feed that links to the basement. I can't sleep and I figured I'd check to see if she could.

She isn't sleeping. No. She's standing behind the bed, clearly rattled by the presence of my younger brother who I had expressly told to stay out of the fucking basement.

My first thought is, *What the fuck?*

My second thought is, *I'm gonna go down right now and yank him outta there.*

My third thought is... *Let's see how this plays out.*

That's before Lev ends up on his ass on the floor, rocking back and forth as though he's going to explode out of his skin. I've seen this happen enough times to know that he's close to a full-blown breakdown. And if that happens, calming him down is a huge process. Hours of incessant murmuring and comforting and pleading.

Then comes the recovery period. Sometimes, it takes a day or two. Other times, much, much longer. That's the last thing I need right now. I can't afford to let things spiral out of—

I freeze when Alyssa drops onto the floor in front of Lev and covers her face just like he's doing. She mirrors his every movement until it becomes a game. Until he drops his hands and stops looking so terrified.

She's halted the meltdown right in its tracks. It took me fucking *years* to get the hang of it. How the hell did she

manage that in a single try?

Maybe she's a witch.

It's so much easier to accept than the alternative, which is that *she's just a good person.*

I remain fixated on the screen as Lev starts to interact with her. From afar, it looks like a real conversation. I put the audio feed on belatedly but they're both talking so softly that I can't tell what they're saying. It doesn't really matter, though—I don't need to hear them.

Watching them is enough.

I end up watching through the hours of video games and several bowls of cereal. I catch Lev smiling a couple of times. The light is dim, but I could swear his cheeks blush, too.

Hours later, Lev finally leaves the basement in his usual abrupt style. But not before they exchange a few words at the door. Alyssa is smiling when she lies back on the bed, her eyes trained on the ceiling.

What is she smiling about? I wonder.

It dawns on me a second later that I can just go down and find out for myself. Sitting and stewing has never been my style.

I barge in in my usual fashion and Alyssa bolts upright. The fact that she's still wearing her dopey smile tells me that she's expecting someone else. It curdles as soon as she realizes she's not getting what she wants.

"Oh," she says dully. "It's you."

"Disappointed?"

Her lips seal together and she shrugs nonchalantly. A little *too* nonchalantly, in my opinion. "I was hoping for Svetlana. I requested French toast for breakfast today."

Would I have believed that blatant lie if I hadn't just spent the last several hours watching her? Probably not, but I wouldn't have thought the little *kiska* would hide something as jarring as my brother. Good to know—the girl can do a lot more with her tongue than just suck me off.

You fucking fool. Don't go there.

But it's too late. My cock is already perking up. My reckless thoughts are partly to blame, but my proximity to Alyssa has a little something to do with it, too.

Not that that's happening again.

Once was enough. Twice was too much. A third time would be fucking catastrophic.

"How's your morning going?" I ask coolly.

"As well as can be expected when you're locked in a room without fresh air or human company."

I narrow my eyes. "It seems you had plenty of human company the last few hours. Unless of course you're making a crack about my brother being less than that?"

Her eyes go wide. It's cartoonishly cute. "You were watching us!"

I shrug. "Yes."

She glowers at me and those blue eyes of her turn piercing. "Are you ever *not* being a total fucking creep?"

"You keep giving me reasons to."

"Oh, right," she scoffs viciously, "because *I'm* the one who can't be trusted. I'm sure you saw it all happen, but in case you forgot, I'll remind you: Lev is the one that entered the basement of his own free will. I didn't make him do anything. I can't even open the damn door on my own!"

"No, but you did just lie to me about his visit."

She jumps out of bed and squares up with me, all fighting form and indignation. It's hard to take her seriously in those pajamas, though. Strawberry-and-lemon printed sets don't exactly strike fear in a man's heart.

"I'm sorry—I don't see how you can expect honesty from me when you give me nothing in return!"

"That's not how this works, *narushitel*."

“Of course not, because contrary to the bullshit you’re feeding me, I’m your hostage!” Her eyes flash as she takes an angry step towards me. “And I didn’t tell you about Lev’s visit because he was worried you’d be mad at him. I didn’t want to stir up shit by tattling on him and I certainly wasn’t going to risk upsetting him.”

She’s breathing heavily. Apparently, my presence causes the exact opposite reaction to Lev’s.

Great—first, I was jealous of a purple dildo. Now, I’m jealous of my little brother. Things are going fucking swell.

“You were really good with him.”

My own words take me by surprise. I don’t recant them, though. I’m not usually in the habit of handing out compliments but in this case, Alyssa deserves the credit. She really was incredible with him.

My sincerity must take her off-guard, too, because she stops short, her eyes going wide, her anger deflating. She clears her throat awkwardly and shuffles her weight from one leg to the other.

“Well... he’s a kind soul.”

That’s the first kind thing I’ve heard anyone say about him in a while. Lev doesn’t meet new people anymore. I made that decision early on after the accident. Or rather, Lev had made the decision for me. Each of the few instances we did manage to get him out of the estate ended in disaster. Something would happen, Lev would react, and then other people would react to him. They’d point and stare; some would laugh; others would yell.

Strangers can muster up patience and compassion for a child, but Lev is not that in their eyes. He is the grown, unhinged man who snatched a stuffed rabbit toy from a toddler and refused to give it back. He is the hulking brute who started sobbing hysterically because someone popped a balloon ten feet away. He is the scarred, hunched, frightened twenty-two-year-old who starts screaming in fear when a random stranger brushes too close past him.

No one sees the broken child inside that huge, tortured body.

And even if they could...

They wouldn't understand the first fucking thing about him.

Eventually, I realized that our outings were doing more harm than good. He took days to recover from them and, even after the dust settled, he'd walk a little slower, talk a little quieter—as though *he* was the one who had something to be ashamed of.

"He's a kind soul," I echo gruffly. "Yeah. Not everyone sees that."

She chews on her bottom lip. "He was really agitated when he first saw me."

I nod. "He's not used to people he doesn't know. And when he has been exposed to them... well, they haven't been very nice to him."

Alyssa blinks away sudden tears. "That's horrible."

"He doesn't usually take to anyone as fast as he did with you. Especially when there's no familiar buffer around to mediate the situation."

She smiles with just a tint of pride. "We played video games." Then, as if remembering who she's talking to, her eyebrows arrow downward. "But I'm sure you already knew that."

"It was going well. I didn't want to interrupt."

She shakes her head. "Such a creep."

"It's my job to look after my brother."

Her eyes pique up with realization as she glances around the upper corners of the basement. "The cameras... You installed them for Lev?"

I nod. "After he has an episode, he doesn't talk. He recedes into himself and stays down here for days until he's worked the trauma of the experience out of his system."

She's back to chewing on her lip. Her voice, when it comes out, is tentative and wary. "Uri... what *happened*?"

I wince. It's a fair question. But the thing is, I don't talk about Lev with strangers. The necessary staff and security and Bratva personnel have a dry account of his condition, but it lacks details and emotion. If they have any affection for him at all, it comes from a place of professionalism. He's a job first, a person second.

Which has worked all these years.

But here she is, this blonde bombshell who has no freaking clue that that's exactly what she is, and she's asking me to tell her one of my most protected secrets?

My first instinct is to lie. It's just easier that way, especially since I'm not planning on having her here for very much longer.

But I can't get the image of her and Lev out of my head. Every time I blink, I see them on the floor, peeking at each other from between their parted fingers. It's not a connection he has made often.

Or at all.

And it feels selfish, even cruel, to lie to her now. Perhaps, in order to get her to trust me, I need to show her that *I* trust *her*.

It begs the question; when was the last time I trusted anyone outside of my inner circle? Am I making a huge mistake by trusting her?

Am I going to look back at this moment one day and think, *That's where it all went wrong?*

Only one way to find out.

ALYSSA

Uri's usually unreadable mask cracks for a split second. His eyes darken, his brow furrows, and his right hand clenches into a fist.

For the first time, I stop thinking about the politics. I forget about the fact that I'm his captive and he's my jailer. I choose to ignore the complicated, irreparably fucked-up dynamics between us.

Instead, I speak from the heart.

"Uri... I know I've only just met Lev, but I do care about him. And I would never do or say anything to hurt him."

His gaze meets mine. If he chooses not to tell me Lev's story, I won't push him. Because I get it. I understand the need to want to protect someone you love at any cost.

I pull at my Z charm and wait for him to decide what he wants to do. The silence drags on for what feels like an hour. Then finally—

He sighs. "Sit down."

I walk over to the bed and perch down on the edge of it. Then I pat the empty space next to me. He saunters over and sits, leaving only a foot or two between us. It's closer than I'm expecting. He smells like coffee this morning. Coffee and cinnamon.

He closes his eyes. "Lev was in the car accident that killed my parents."

It's weird. I'm expecting a sad story—a horrible one, in fact—and yet I still have a visceral reaction to hearing it. My body goes cold and goosebumps spread along my arms and legs.

“My father was driving. Lev was in the back seat. He was twelve years old at the time.”

“My God,” I murmur. “That’s too young.”

“A train derailed. A bad length of track made the railway engineer lose control. We found out later that there was an inspection oversight and the train was already en route before anyone caught it.”

I clap my hands over my mouth. “That’s horrible.”

“When it hit their car, it was going fast enough to do some serious damage. But that wasn’t it. The car tumbled over the lip of a ravine and went bouncing down. The train followed and crushed the car beneath it. It was a fucking disaster. One after the next after the next.”

His eyes are still closed. With every word, I notice little twitches in his face. As if he’s feeling the pain of every roll of the car, every twist of metal, every crack of glass.

“Seventeen people died in that derailment. Including my parents. It took days to scale down the cliffside and get to them, though. Nikolai and I went in with our father’s men and found the car, trapped in the ravine. We were sure it was over for all of them, but when we got down there... Lev was still breathing.” He stops for a moment and his face smooths over. “I should say, he was barely breathing. Another hour and he would have been dead. That’s how close we came to losing him.”

I can’t imagine it. The horror of knowing your parents are dead, but then to *find* their bodies? To pull them from the wreckage knowing there’s no hope anymore?

That Lev survived at all is nothing short of a miracle.

“We gave him medical attention on the spot, stabilized him before we took him to the nearest hospital. We had our own doctors fly in so they could treat him. Every single one told us

he wouldn't make it. His injuries were too severe, his brain too far damaged."

"You didn't believe them." I'm not asking him a question. I *know* instinctively that's what he would have believed because *I* wouldn't have given up on Z until the last breath had left her body.

Uri nods. "Niko and I took turns at his bedside. He needed a dozen different surgeries in the first few weeks. His body was broken—but bodies are easy to fix. The mind, however..."

I clamp down on my bottom lip. *Do not cry. Don't make this about you.*

"He was in a coma for almost four months before he woke up. But it took a while for us to figure out that he was... different. Not his normal self. He had regressed in so many different ways but the doctors said that was normal for a coma patient. That he would need to be taught certain things all over again. We were expecting it." He exhales sharply. "What we weren't expecting was the personality change—or rather the personality regression. Mentally speaking, it was like he had aged backwards. He wasn't a teenager anymore. His next birthday will be his twenty-second... but the Lev I knew back then never grew up."

I can't stop a tear from sliding down the side of my face. "Uri... I can't imagine..."

"There's no cure," he says almost defensively. "There's no hope. There's no getting better for Lev. This is how he'll always be. He'll always be dependent on other people to look after him."

"I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to be sorry for," he snarls harshly. "Lev is not a burden to me. Nor has he ever been."

I flinch but I understand his defensive instincts perfectly. Rather than feel wounded, I feel only respect. This immense and overwhelming respect for Uri and everything he has done for Lev. Everything he has *been* for Lev.

“That’s not how I meant it,” I tell him softly. “I’m just sorry that your family had to go through that. All of it. Any of it.”

He’s not quite meeting my eyes. His silence is heavy with the weight of his grief. Or maybe I’m just projecting. And because I’m uncomfortable with silences and because there’s nothing I can see right now that would change anything or make it better, I cave to my worst instinct.

I reach out and take his hand.

There’s an initial stab of fear when I first make contact. And then our fingers link together and it feels natural. Like we’ve been holding hands our entire lives.

“I get it now. The high walls, the security, the basement. It’s just all the ways you’re trying to protect him. To keep him happy and comfortable.”

He shakes his head. “I’m not sure if he’s ever truly happy.”

I can hear it in his voice—the burden of falling short. The burden of feeling like whatever you do is not enough. I felt something similar after Ziva’s death.

In the end, all you’re left with is guilt to add to the grief.

It doesn’t help.

I squeeze his hand, surprised and happy that he hasn’t pulled away. “He loves you, Uri. He looks up to you. He didn’t say a lot but from the little he did say, I understood that much.”

Whether by accident or intention, I don’t know, but his eyes meet mine. And he doesn’t look away. “You’re crying,” he whispers.

“I cry only when it’s important.”

I’m not sure who leans in first. Maybe it’s him; more likely, it’s me. But our lips collide. It’s gentle, soft, maybe a bit desperate, but there’s nothing remotely tentative about this kiss. It feels like an emotional lifeline.

And it feels as much for me as it is for him.

The entire time, he doesn’t let go of my hand.

We've had sex before—twice now—and yet it's never felt quite this intimate. There's something about this kiss that's different. There's something about the last few minutes that have changed everything.

Maybe Uri realizes the same thing, too, because he breaks the kiss abruptly and pulls his hand out from underneath mine.

Then he's off the bed so fast that I think he might have just given me whiplash. I bring my fingers to my lips, still tasting the phantom kiss he's left behind. I can only see his profile from the way he's standing, several feet away from me now.

I feel like I'm supposed to apologize. But honestly? I'm not sorry.

"I should go and check on Lev," he says gruffly, already turning for the door.

I hate the idea of leaving him like this, but I know that asking him to stay will only make things worse. We've both crossed yet another line—and trying to pretend like we have a normal relationship, if you can even call it that, is never going to work.

"Uri?"

He stops short and glances at me over his shoulder. "Yes?"

"Um... when we had—when we were *together*, we didn't use protection." I can feel the color flood my cheeks. "Either time. I think I need Plan B, just to be safe."

He nods without argument. "I'll get it to you."

I'll get it to you. Not I'll bring it to you. That one hurts more than it should. It's entirely irrational but that's what doing stupid stuff like kissing men you shouldn't be kissing will do to you.

"Thanks. And, er... one more thing?"

He frowns but stays still. I get off the bed and walk around him so that I'm blocking his path to the door.

"Now that Lev knows about me, could you maybe let me out of this basement?" I plead. "I can't stay down here for much

longer, Uri. I'm already going crazy."

His jaw clenches and his gaze flickers over me. I'm sure he's going to refuse me. Then something imperceptible in his face softens and his shoulders drop. "If I do, you are not to leave the grounds under any circumstances. Is that clear?"

The relief coursing through me is immediate. "Yes."

"I'm only agreeing to this because it's what's best for Lev. He's been out of his basement for too long and it's starting to show. I don't want to push him towards another episode."

"Understood. Thank you."

His gaze lingers on me for a few seconds.

And then he's gone.

ALYSSA

It takes two more days before Uri makes good on his word and gives me a room on the upper floors of his house. “House” is in some serious quotation marks, though. This place is a palace if ever I’ve seen one. They need to have maps hung up at regular intervals like kiosks at the mall.

I don’t see Lev or Uri as I follow Svetlana through the halls. But I catch his cinnamon-smoke scent the moment I enter my new room.

At first, I’m taken back by all the light. It’s just so damn *bright*. My eyes are actually hurting from it. Once they’ve adjusted, I examine the space. One thing is immediately obvious...

It’s *gorgeous*.

Mainly because of the sleek, mahogany bed and the stunning blue-and-green Persian carpet rolled over most of the teak wood floors. I walk through the maze of it, running my feet through the shag and trying not to squeak with delight too obnoxiously.

“Oh my God! This is—”

“I thought you’d like it.”

I yelp. When I turn around, I realize that Svetlana is gone...

And Uri is standing in her place.

He’s even more dazzling in the light, which is highly annoying. I’m just gonna have to try not to look directly at

him. A little pinky swear from me to me.

“Thanks for the room,” I mumble shyly. “It’s beautiful.”

“Just so you know, the windows and doors lock from the outside.”

I roll my eyes, all sense of gratitude immediately vanishing. “Where am I going to run? This place is a fortress and I live right next door. I have nowhere to go.”

“This coming from the woman who scaled my fence to retrieve a package.”

“One time.”

“Once is enough.”

I purse my lips. “You’re really gonna lock me up in here?”

I’m fully prepared to argue but he surprises me with a compromise I’m not expecting. “You will be locked in your room only at night. During the day, you have freedom of the house and the gardens.”

“Oh... okay.”

“There is one condition.”

“You mean *apart* from the condition of not running away?” He scowls, so I sigh deeply. “Alright. Hit me.”

“On certain weekends, you will be required to go back down to the basement.”

“On *certain* weekends?”

He nods. “That’s nonnegotiable.”

“Can I know why?”

“No,” he replies curtly, putting an end to any further questions.

I get the feeling that the kiss we shared in the basement might be the reason he’s being so brusque with me right now. Maybe I’d gotten a little too close. A little too vulnerable.

“I’ll leave you now,” he says with a weird, stiff formality.

“But you won’t lock the door, right?”

The corner of his mouth edges up and he makes a show of leaving it halfway open. It's not total freedom.

But it's something.



And boy, is it *something*!

After almost a week in that basement, freedom of the house feels like America after a lifetime in a Siberian prison camp.

I can *breathe* again!

I can feel the sunlight on my skin again!

I can touch the grass underneath my feet again!

My first day of freedom is spent lying on the rolling green lawn like I'm starring in a *Sound of Music* remake, gazing up at the sky and counting clouds and humming under my breath.

At some point, I sit up and realize that the living room blinds are drawn back. There's a ripple on the side and Lev's face pops up for a second. He catches sight of me, his eyes go wide, and then he disappears as fast as he came.

Smiling, I peel myself off the lawn and walk barefoot back into the living room. Lev is crouching by the edge of the windows, making no secret of the fact that he was spying on me.

Something he has in common with his big brother.

"Hey, Lev!"

He flinches, his body curving inwards. He looks like he wants to make himself smaller. I approach him carefully, making sure to keep the sofa between us. "I'm glad to see you again."

He swallows. "Why?"

"Because I enjoyed spending time with you."

He blushes red. "Why aren't you in the basement?"

"Your brother agreed to let me out for a breather. I was missing the sun."

“I hate the sun. It’s too bright.”

“It’s life-giving, Lev. If it weren’t for the sun, it’d be dark and cold and scary all the time.” I inch towards him a little, watching his face the whole time to see if I tread too close. “But I’ve seen you go outside sometimes. When you play football with Uri.”

“It’s our quality time,” he recites in a mumble.

I smile. Something about big, scary Uri inviting his younger brother out for “quality time” makes me feel all warm and squiggly inside. “Would you like to come outside right now and spend some quality time with me?”

He stiffens instantly and his gaze darts towards the closed blinds. “Now?”

“I’ll tell you what: we can make a happy compromise. We’ll find a blanket and I’ll put it under the big tree in the corner so you’re not directly under the sun. How’s that?”

He peeks out from behind the blinds before he turns in my general direction. He’s still not eager to make eye contact but at least he’s not as anxious as he was the first time I met him. “I dunno.”

“We can have lunch outside on the lawn, too, if you’d like.”

His eyes bug out. “Lunch? Outside?”

“Why not? It’ll be fun.” He’s pulling at the edges of his t-shirt and there’s a slight rocking motion in the way he shifts his weight from one foot to the other. I have to caution myself about pushing him too much. We just met, after all. “But if you would rather not, I’ll understand.”

He wrings his t-shirt in his fists as his gaze flickers about the room uncertainly. “I like... quality time,” he says at last.

Be cool, Alyssa, be cool.

“Oh, Lev, that makes me so happy. Thank you!”

He gives me another small blush. “I want cornflakes for lunch.”

“I’ll do my best. Come on, let’s go to the kitchen and see what we can rustle up.”

I have to scoot a little closer to him to get to the doorway. He presses himself against the wall as though he’s terrified to touch me. I wonder if that will get better with time or if he’s always going to be as nervous of me every time we’re close together.

The kitchen is empty when we go in. It’s also ginormous. There’s a large pantry stocked to the nines and a walk-in freezer about the size of my first apartment. As it turns out, Lev is just as overwhelmed as I am. Every time I ask him where something is, he just shrugs or grunts noncommittally.

Then I hear the sound of confident footsteps and I know instinctively who’s coming.

“Lev, what are you—” Uri stops short when he sees me standing in front of the pantry. “Oh.” He clears his throat. “You two hungry?”

“Actually, Lev and I were gonna prepare a picnic lunch.”

Lev takes a step towards Uri and puffs his chest out. “Outside,” he adds proudly.

This is the first time I’ve seen the brothers interact up close. I’m fully aware I’m gawking.

“You sure, buddy?” Uri asks, clapping Lev on the shoulder.

“Uh-huh.” He nods vigorously, his eyes never leaving Uri’s. And I get it—he wants his big brother’s approval. He wants to make Uri proud.

None of that explains why I’m about to bawl like an idiot just watching it.

“But—” Lev’s voice dips low. “—can you come, too?”

My heart shivers. It’s so sweet and vulnerable the way he asks. Somehow, it’s even more endearing coming from a man only a few inches shorter than Uri himself.

Uri answers right away. “Of course.” He glances at me right after, though, and I wonder if he’s doing this purely for Lev.

Or if maybe, just *maybe*, I'm part of the reason, too?

Don't be an idiot.

"Then you can help me figure out where everything is," I interject, "because this kitchen is a maze."



Twenty minutes later, the three of us are sitting on a picnic blanket underneath the huge oak tree on the south-facing lawn. Lev is pressed up against the trunk, his legs pulled up to his chest and his eyes darting around at every squirrel and crow that passes within a quarter-mile of us. It's not quite the relaxed picnic vibe I was going for, but I'm hoping that he'll ease into it the longer we sit out here. He certainly seems a little calmer when he's eating his cornflakes.

"How about a sandwich after you're done with that?" Uri asks.

"No."

"*Brat*, you have physical therapy in an hour. You'll need the strength."

"No."

Uri drops it. At no point do I detect even a hint of impatience or annoyance. "Okay, I'll make sure to keep some snacks ready after you're done with therapy, okay?"

Lev ignores that completely and keeps eating.

How is it that a man I used to think of as rude, unapproachable, superior, even brutish can be so damn... *kind*? So compassionate and patient and caring?

We eat in companionable silence. Lev never loses that jumpy, nervous quality through the lunch and because of it, I can't quite relax, either. I'm stumped as to how Uri can lie there, looking like a *GQ* model, completely unbothered, completely at ease.

Because this is his life. Day in, day out—he will never stop being Lev's caretaker.

That's probably the moment I realize that, where Uri is concerned...

I'm in big trouble.

ALYSSA

Lev leaving changes everything. Gone is the easy relaxed vibe, the breezy summertime chill. Now, I'm hyper-aware of every last thing. My head spins on a swivel, clocking every squirrel that dares wander close, listening to every nuance in Uri's inhales and exhales.

From afar, Uri and I probably look like a couple on a date. And a very romantic date at that.

I remember when Elle and Liam had just started "hanging out," one of their first dates was a picnic in Joshua Tree. *Ultimate panty-dropper move*, Elle had told me afterwards.

She's not wrong; it's just that this particular picnic was not meant for me and Uri. It was meant for me, Uri, and Lev. Someone up there must be pulling strings and laughing at my expense. The thought that it might be Ziva makes me feel slightly better.

Uri is resting on his forearms, his head angled towards the house. Is he trying to figure out how to leave? Is he just going to ignore me for a bit, then burp up some lame excuse about being busy? Is he regretting joining us in the first place?

My God, I'm so bad at silences.

"He still has physical therapy?" I blurt.

"Two hours a day, three times a week." Uri slowly turns back to face me. "Every week. The accident destroyed his leg and his spine. He was this close to being paralyzed for life, but the doctors managed to save him from that fate, at least. Still, he

needs to do specific exercises to make sure his limbs remain usable.”

“And he doesn’t mind the therapy?”

“Not anymore. We have George to thank for that. There were six PTs before him and none lasted more than a few months.”

I can’t help a shy grin. “Did Lev scare off the others?”

Uri shakes his head wearily. “Lev is unpredictable. When he’s calm, he’s calm. When he’s out of control, he’s a force of nature. It’s hard to know who he’ll bond with—but when he does, he bonds hard.”

He gives me a glance that feels almost... accusatory? But as usual, I’m just taking a stab in the dark here. Guessing what Uri is feeling is a dangerous game.

“I’m glad he’s found someone he’s comfortable with,” I remark. “I’ll bet that doesn’t happen very often.”

“Outside of the family, George is the only one.”

Is that another accusing glance? Why do I get the feeling he’s trying to tell me something without actually saying it?

I tilt my face up towards the sun and sigh. “It feels so good to be out.”

“Enjoy it while you can. You’ve got five days of sunshine.”

My eyes fly to his face. “You’re really gonna make me go down to the basement every weekend?”

“Like I said, it might not be every weekend. But this coming weekend—yes.”

“Exactly *how* many weekends do you anticipate I’ll be here for?”

“For as long as it takes to make sure the threat against you is taken care of.” He’s really sticking to that explanation but with every passing day, it feels more and more like a lame excuse.

“But why?”

He arches his eyebrows. “I didn’t think I’d need to remind you about the finger.”

I flinch and shudder at the memory. “Not *that*. I meant, why do I have to go down to the basement on weekends? The staff knows I’m here. Lev knows I’m here. Security knows I’m here. What’s the big deal?”

In my mind, that’s a simple question. But not judging from the look on Uri’s face. “That’s none of your concern.”

“Considering I’m the one who’s stuck down there, I’d say it is very much my concern.”

He scowls and looks away. “I’ll make sure you get more knitting supplies and crossword puzzles.”

I glare at him, but it doesn’t do a lick of good because he’s not actually looking at me. *Why* is he not looking at me? What is he hiding?

My heart drums hard against my chest and I find myself thinking about all the women he used to parade around here. Tall women, short women. Skinny women, curvy women. I’ve seen every hair color, ethnicity, and body type come through this estate. The one thing they all had in common was that each and every one of those women were absolutely gorgeous—and they *knew* it.

It strikes me that I’ve just assumed Uri stopped entertaining his Playboy Playmate dates at the estate since I entered it. But who’s to say if that’s true or not? Now that I really think about it, I don’t just feel embarrassed; I feel stupid. Why on Earth would he stop sleeping around just because I’m here? I’m nothing to him. Nothing more than an inconvenience.

“Is that from your sister?”

The question comes out of left field and it successfully distracts me from setting off on that particular downward spiral. I look down at my charm bracelet and of course, I’m fiddling with my Z link without even realizing it.

“Um, well... it was hers. Ziva’s. My sister. I started wearing it after—” The lump that forms in my throat is fat and ruthless. I swallow it away. “—just, after.”

He’s watching me close enough that I feel my cheeks burn. “You touch it every time you feel uncomfortable,” he

observes.

I shrug. "It's basically my safety blanket at this point."

"That makes sense."

I frown. "Does it?"

He glances at the bracelet. "I'm guessing before that bracelet, *she* was your safety blanket."

"Oh my." I haven't even got a coherent word out and already I can feel the tears coming. I try to bite them down but the lump in my throat is back with a vengeance. I make the mistake of looking into his piercing blue eyes.

I'm not sure what I see in them. Sympathy? Understanding? Compassion? Whatever it is, a sob escapes my lips and then I'm fully crying.

"Dammit," I choke up. "I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize."

I wipe my face with the sleeve of my shirt but it doesn't make a difference because the tears don't stop. "*God*, I hate crying. This is embarrassing."

"Why? You're crying for someone you love. There's no shame in that."

He makes a good point. But unfortunately, it only makes the tears flow harder. The weight on my chest persists. That old familiar bruise. It's been a while since I've sat with it like I'm doing now, but spending time with Lev has pulled it to the surface.

And since I'm already crying, I figure I might as well talk about it.

"I-it was... Leukemia," I manage to burble out. "That's what killed her." Uri's eyes soften considerably, though he says nothing. "It took me a very long time to learn how to live without her. Sometimes, I wonder if I've ever really learned to live without her."

"It's not the same thing," he says gently. "It never will be. It took me a while to adjust, too."

I raise my tear-stained eyes to his. “In what way?”

He sighs and his brows furrow. He looks disappointed. “Let’s just say I wasn’t always so patient with Lev. But—he’s alive. At least we didn’t lose him, too. That’s all that matters. That’s what I remind myself.”

My body angles towards him, drawn to the sadness on his face. I know that feeling; I can relate to that feeling. “It must have been hard to lose the brother you knew.”

“That’s exactly what it was. He was alive, but still... It felt like the boy he used to be was gone forever. He may have survived the crash but I mourned Lev as much as I mourned my parents.”

“Mourning,” I whisper. “It’s strange, isn’t it? To be left with all these thoughts and memories and feelings of this person you’ll never see again. This person who was stamped all over your life and then suddenly—”

“You’re alone.”

I nod. “You can’t reach them.”

“And you know that you have to either sink or swim all on your own now.”

I nod again, a tiny part of my brain registering that his face seems to be getting closer to mine. And my body is pulling closer to his.

My eyes flutter, ready to be shut. We shouldn’t be doing this but—

Ping. Ping. Ping.

We jerk apart violently and Uri looks down at his phone. Which I’m grateful for, because my cheeks are burning up and I can’t take much more of this tiptoeing ever closer to the line we cannot, should not, will not cross.

Then he bounds to his feet, his eyes never once flickering to me. “I have to go.”

From the look on his face, it’s obviously urgent. Or maybe he’s just relieved that the text message came at the exact right

time to stop us from going too far. He turns and jogs back to the house.

And I sit there, waiting for the relief to hit me.

But... nope.

No such luck.

URI

“We have to act now, Uri! There’s no fucking way we can leave this unanswered.”

Nikolai’s nostrils are flared, his eyes wide with indignation, his face blotchy with fury. He keeps waving the letter in my face as though that helps his case.

I cross my arms and fix him with a pointed stare. “Isn’t there?”

Nikolai balks, his eyes bugging out even further. Gritting his teeth, he smooths out the paper, holds it up to his face, and starts reading loudly.

“*Ax the upcoming takedown—*”

“For fuck’s sake, Niko, I read the goddamn note—”

My brother only reads louder. “—*you are planning on The Black Rose or else your man is dead!*” He glares at me. “It’s signed by Sobakin.”

“As I said, I saw the damn letter. And I can read. So I don’t need you reciting it back to me.”

“Then why are you standing there acting as though it’s some silly prank? It’s got his seal on it and everything!”

If Niko wasn’t so sure that Igor’s life was still hanging in the balance, I’d have rolled my eyes. “His seal doesn’t have the power to make me shit my pants.”

Nikolai narrows his eyes. “What are you implying?”

“I’m not implying anything; I’m saying it outright: you’re playing right into his hands.”

“Fuck you.”

I snatch the letter from Nikolai’s outstretched hand. “He sends us one threatening letter and I’m supposed to just crumble to sobbing pieces and do whatever he says?”

“He’ll kill Igor!”

“Don’t you get it?” At this point, I’m shouting, too. Nikolai is the only one who can still get a rise out of me. I used to think that was a good thing. “Igor’s already dead. And if by some miracle he’s not, then he’s as good as dead. Boris isn’t just gonna release him back to us because we ask nicely.”

“He might—if we give him what he wants.”

I grimace, forever shocked that two brothers born from the same two parents can be so different when it comes down to the wire. “And what precedent does that set, *brat*?”

“The precedent that we will not abandon our men.”

“No,” I growl. “It sets the precedent that *all* our men are vulnerable now, because the moment he takes one, we’ll cave and give him what he wants. He’s counting on us reacting to this move because if we do, he’ll keep pulling the strings and we’ll be reduced to his little dancing puppets.”

A sound escapes through Nikolai’s teeth, some cross between a growl, a hiss, and a retch. “I think you’re making a mistake.”

“You frequently do.”

He glares at me. Our eyes are pretty much the only thing we have in common at this point. That and our loyalty towards the Bratva. They just manifest in different ways.

“What’s happening with the girl?” he spits out.

I frown. “What girl?”

“The *girl*,” he spits. “The one in Lev’s basement.”

Right. *That* girl.

“She’s still here,” I mutter reluctantly. I have no desire to debate this with my brother but I can see he’s jonesing for a good argument.

“Are you serious? When are you going to start using your head and stop thinking with your dick?”

As much as I hate to admit it, that hits a nerve. I pull my lips back to bare my teeth. “The situation is under control.”

Nikolai shakes his head. “You need to think about Lev and Pol. You need to think about this Bratva above all else.”

That’s the thing about siblings—they know exactly which nerves to hit. “You think I don’t spend *all* my time thinking about this Bratva? This family?”

“I think you’ve been distracted lately.”

“The girl has nothing to do with it. I would never let anyone distract me from protecting Lev or Polina.”

Nikolai doesn’t say anything but he does purse his lips up in a way that makes me want to take a punch at his face.

“If anything else comes up, let me know,” I snarl before turning for the door.

Nikolai doesn’t stop me. I march straight to my car where it’s parked at the base of his sloping driveway. I put the Ferrari into reverse and rip out through his bronzed gates. It’s a two-minute drive to my estate, but I make a left instead of a right and dive into the adjoining neighborhood where the closest pharmacy is.

The woman at the counter doesn’t look up at me until I’m standing right in front of her. When she does, her eyes nearly bug out of her head. “Whoa!” she gasps. Her cheeks go bright pink, but it’s not nearly as endearing as it is when Alyssa blushes. “Y-you’re tall.”

She’s in her early thirties or so. Curly blonde hair, deep green eyes. A few weeks ago, I would have flirted, asked for her name, perhaps invited her to dinner. But right now, I have no desire to do any of those things.

I tell myself it's because I have a pill to purchase and I've already left it too late.

I tell myself it has nothing to do with Alyssa.

"Plan B pill, please."

"Oh. Er, of course."

She scrambles to the back wall and hikes up a little stepladder to grab me a Plan B box. My eyes pass over her ass. She's fit and attractive. And yet... I feel nothing.

No interest. No attraction. Not the slightest bit of craving.

"Here you go, sir."

I pay and head back to my car. I can see the woman craning her head towards the windows as I drive away.

I don't look back.

When I arrive at the estate, my first instinct is to go check on Alyssa and then Lev. But with Nikolai's words still ringing in my ears, I go to Lev first.

He's in the basement, playing his games. He doesn't stop when I open the door. "Hey, buddy, how was physical therapy?"

"Good."

"What did you do after?"

"Nothing."

"Did you run into Alyssa after George left?"

"Yeah."

Fucking hell, it's like pulling teeth today.

"Did you have dinner with her?"

"Yeah."

I grit my teeth. "What did you guys talk about?"

"Lots."

"Lev, can you pause that game while I'm talking to you?"

Lev's eyes veer to me for a moment and his jaw tightens. "No."

His body has started rocking slightly, so I sigh and leave. "Fine. I'll leave you then. Go to bed soon, okay?"

He doesn't acknowledge that apart from a grunt. I shut the door and head to my office. I'm craving something strong again. The last time I had this feeling, I ended up in the basement fucking the life out of Alyssa.

Not happening again. The fact that I've fucked her twice already is enough of a black mark on my record. *Should have just fucked the green-eyed pharmacist instead.*

But even the thought of it—no matter how hard I try forcing myself to linger on the fantasy—doesn't get my blood pumping. Which is pissing me the hell off.

So I grab myself a drink. Vodka, the best I have available, because it's one of *those* days. I take a huge sip that burns my throat as it goes down.

Okay, so maybe Alyssa has caught my interest a little more than most other women, but it's just an inflated sense of lust. There's no way it's anything other than desire. Sure, I can relate to the woman on *some* things, but that doesn't mean shit. I can throw her back into the wild the moment she doesn't need to be here anymore. Life will get easier. I'll fall back into my routines again. I can restart my—what did she call it?—my "revolving door of women."

But instead of pivoting into those future possibilities, I end up thinking about Alyssa.

And not just her naked body spread out across the bed. Well, not *only* that.

I think about the way her eyes filled up with tears when I told her about how my parents died. I think about the way she looks at Lev. I think about the anguish twisting her face when she opened up to me about her sister.

It's just sex. Lust. Desire. That's all.

But even with the vodka to smooth things over, it's not so easy to believe.

ALYSSA

The picnic blanket under the big tree in the south garden has become my regular haunt. I'm out here so often that I even manage to convince Lev to join me from time to time. Today, he's got another physical therapy appointment, so I'm soaking up the sun all by my lonesome with a book in hand.

To be fair, I'm mostly ignoring the book. Well, not *ignoring* it; it's just that I've read the same sentence about a thousand times in a row. I keep thinking about how it's been almost forty-eight hours since I last saw or spoke to Uri.

After his abrupt departure during our picnic the other day, he became a ghost. Lev mentioned that Uri said this and Uri did that. That he checked on him in the mornings, the evenings, every night before he fell asleep.

But *I* never saw him.

It's enough to make me roll my eyes. He thinks he's so damn mysterious. Mr. *No One Can Figure Me Out*. The big, scary mobster who's an enigma to all he meets.

Severed fingers, he can handle.

But a vulnerable conversation? No siree. *That's* where he draws a line.

Well, whatever. It's not like I *want* to see him. It's not like I miss talking to him. I've got Lev and though his conversational skills are limited, I'm grateful to have someone around to spend time with. Even if that requires suffering through hours upon hours of video games.

I pick up my book and attempt another stab at it. Once I discover that the male protagonist is a tall, handsome, broody lord of something or the other, I shut it again. I've had enough of tall, handsome, broody men. They might get your heart pumping and certain other *ahem* body parts throbbing... but they also leave you feeling constantly uneasy, unsure, and insecure.

Who needs that? Not I.

So he can go ahead and avoid me for as long as I'm his prisoner. I don't give a flying fuck. I'm much better off on my —

“*This* is what you choose to do with your newfound freedom?”

I startle with shock, a little squeak escaping through my teeth. I rock back on my knees and straighten to face him. Uri has his eyebrows arched with amusement.

I clear my throat self-consciously. “First of all, reading a book in a dark basement is very different than reading a book under sunlight. Second of all, I'd hardly call this ‘freedom.’ I'm still trapped here with nowhere to go and nothing to do.”

“If I recall, you have a box full of sex toys to keep you busy.”

I blush and scowl simultaneously. “Not the same thing. I want to go *out*.”

“Where would you like to go?”

“What does it matter?” I laugh bitterly. “It's not like you're offering.”

“What if I am?”

Slowly, I get to my feet. The sun is slanting down on top of us, turning his hair into a molten mess of gold and cinnamon. “Don't toy with me.”

He smiles and my heart shudders. *So much for my aversion to tall, handsome, broody men.* “I wouldn't dream of it. You do plenty of that to yourself.”

“Ha. Ha. Ha.”

He adjusts his posture and tilts his head to the side to look at me from a new angle. “You’re right—you *have* been cooped up here for a long time and you haven’t tried to escape. It’s only fair that I reward good behavior.”

I desperately want to say something snarky but I bite my tongue. If he’s gonna offer me an opportunity to leave the estate, I’m sure as hell not gonna look a gift horse in the mouth. “Where would we go?”

“I figured you’d know exactly what you wanted to do.”

I answer without thinking. “I mean, I don’t *do* much.” He cracks up at that one. *Idiot, think before you speak.* “What I *mean* is—”

“What you mean is your life isn’t that interesting.”

“Hey! It’s plenty interesting. I travel a lot. I’ve been to eighty-seven different countries. I’ve met tons of interesting people and done really cool things and—”

“And when you’re done traveling?” he interrupts. “What then?”

I blink at him.

“You’re just here to mess with me, aren’t you?” I snap, shoving past him. “You have *no* intention of taking me anywhere. You just want to make me feel—”

“Have you been to Sakura?”

I stop short and turn on the spot. “Sakura?” I repeat. “As in the Japanese restaurant that has a three-month long waitlist to get in?”

“That’s the one. Would you like to go?”

Of course I want to go; I’m just not sure if I *should*. We’ve been doing this whole back-and-forth thing for a while now and it’s starting to feel dangerous. Do I really want to be taken to an exclusive, romantic restaurant with a man that I know is not good for me?

The logical part of my brain is saying no.

The emotional part of my brain is saying, *What time are we leaving and what should I wear?*

And despite all the very salient points that my sensible side is throwing at me right now, the one thing that I keep coming back to is this: I've never opened up to anyone the way I've opened up to Uri. Because despite all that control and bravado, there's a deeply complicated, deeply compassionate man who's just trying to look after his family.

I bite my bottom lip and glance at him. "What about the whole 'three-month waitlist' part?"

He scoffs. "There's no waiting list for me."

"Right, you're Mr. Big Shot. I forgot."

He rolls his eyes. "Why don't you go upstairs and pretty yourself up? Sakura has a dress code."

A new wave of insecurity rushes through me. "Um, I, um... don't have anything to wear." Even if I had access to my full wardrobe right now, I doubt I'd have anything appropriate to wear. Do I even own a cocktail dress? A fancy outfit?

But Uri waves his hand in my face unconcernedly. "I'll send something up for you in half an hour or so."

I balk. "Half an hour?"

He's looking down at this phone and typing fast. "Uh-huh."

I narrow my eyes, not that it does any good because he's still not looking at me. "You don't have a stash of clothes that your one-night stands left behind, do you? Because I am *not* wearing any of their dresses."

That gets his attention. Except he doesn't look annoyed so much as endlessly amused. "Why not? Most of my one-night-stands had excellent taste."

My eyes go wide with horror. "You're not serious... are you?"

"For fuck's sake, woman." He sighs. "No, I'm not. Do you really think I'm the kind of man who keeps stuff that my women leave behind? That shit gets thrown out the moment they're out the door."

Something about that phrase “my women” needles me. But I just roll my eyes. “Charming.”

“By the way, Alyssa, just so you know—this outing comes with a caveat.”

I stiffen. “Of course it does.”

“Your adventure—but *my* rules.”

I sigh. “The things I’ll agree to for good sushi. Put that on my gravestone, I guess.”

Then I head back into the house before doubt overrules desire.



Svetlana delivers not one, not two, but three boxes to my room half an hour later.

The moment she leaves, I go for the big one first. Inside is a tasteful black dress with a deep scooped neckline, thin straps, and a hemline that makes me fidget just looking at it.

Too short, my head is telling me. *Too sexy. Too much.*

But it’s not like he’s given me many options. I set it aside and turn my attention elsewhere for now.

The second box contains a pair of strappy black heels that take my breath away. I don’t let myself start doing the math on how many months of rent a pair of Louis Vuittons is worth.

I’m half-expecting jewelry in the third, much smaller box. But what I find inside is much more shocking. There’s a little Plan B pill...

Nestled on top of a small silver bullet vibrator.

What. The. Hell?

“Ah, good. The packages arrived.”

I whirl around to face the door where Uri is standing in the threshold, looking awfully smug in my opinion. Ignoring the blush on my cheeks, I pick up the vibrator and hold it up to him. “What the hell is this?”

“The best way to understand it is through practical use. I can talk you through it if you’d like.”

I take back my first thought. “Smug” doesn’t even begin to cover it.

My own face is burning at this point. “I *know* what it is. What I mean is, why is it here?”

“It’s here for you to wear, of course.” My jaw drops, full-on cartoon style. He chuckles conspiratorially. “Your adventure, my rules, remember?”

“B-b-but... it’s a *vibrator*.”

“A bullet vibrator. It’s made to fit perfectly in that sweet little pussy of yours.”

I gulp hard. I may actually self-combust at this point. But he’s just standing there with that devilish grin on his face, looking at me as though I’m his next meal.

Which, knowing him... I probably am.

“I can’t possibly—”

He shrugs. “I guess I’ll cancel the reservation then.” The jerk actually turns towards the door.

“Wait!”

He glances back over his shoulder, his gaze roving over me first and then moving to the Plan B pill lying on the bed. “I intend to make full use of that pill,” he warns me. “We have a few days to play.”

I’m having a hard time looking at his face or controlling the fire on my cheeks. Goodness knows that coming up with a witty retort is not even remotely in consideration.

“Should I expect to see you downstairs in half an hour?”

I wonder how he’d react if I just called his bluff and turned down the date. A part of me is really tempted to do it, just to see if he would walk away or not. The thing is, if I roll the dice, I’m taking a risk. And if he does walk away, I won’t get out of this estate, I won’t get the world’s greatest sushi, and I won’t get to experience what it feels like to walk into a five-

star restaurant with one of the hottest men on the planet and a vibrator turning my brain and vagina into orgasmic jelly.

Dorothy, you're not in Kansas anymore...

“Half an hour,” I agree in a meek little pipsqueak. “Sounds good.”

Uri smirks and shuts the door behind him on the way out. I take several deep breaths before I start to get ready.

The dress fits like a glove. As I turn to examine myself in the full-length mirror in the bathroom, I realize how sexy it is. My legs are on full display, as is my cleavage, which somehow looks extra generous. The dress also has an inbuilt corset which means my waist is cinched in, accentuating the hourglass figure I didn't even know I had.

So *that's* why people go the designer route. *Macy's, eat your heart out.*

Once the dress is on, I put on the heels. In the blink of an eye, I go from Shylyssa Walsh to some glamazon runway model with legs for miles and a proud strut. It's literally a magic trick. This can't be real.

Next is makeup. I sit in front of the dressing table and stare at the mirror. I don't want to go overboard or anything, but I kinda want to put in some actual effort. If only to drive Uri crazy. So I go with a sleek cat-eye which complements my dress perfectly. I do a little light contouring around the cheekbones, highlight with rouge, and then finish my face off with a nude lip that brings out their natural pink color. Hours of watching YouTube tutorials on “How to Get the Met Gala Look of Your Dreams” that I never actually intended to make use of are getting put into action.

“Okay,” I tell the seductive stranger staring back at me out of the mirror. “You got this.”

That feeling lasts up until I catch sight of the silver bullet vibrator I'm supposed to shove up my nether regions.

Would Shylyssa do this? I wonder with my breath caught in my chest. Would Ziva?

I toy with the charm. It tinkles beneath my fingers like it's trying to tell me something. "Oh, for God's sake—fuck it," I decide suddenly.

I snatch up the toy, flip up the hem of my dress, and tease it inside of me. It's cold at first, but once I adjust, it melts into the background. I step into a pair of black lace panties and try to forget about it altogether.

It's definitely not a tampon, that's for sure. This thing is three times as big and it doesn't have the kind of give that a tampon would. But surprisingly, I can walk and move without discomfort.

"So weird," I mutter as I head downstairs.

Then again, everything about the last several days has been weird. And it doesn't look like that's stopping anytime soon.

URI

Nikolai's voice is dark and cranky when he finally answers my call. "What?"

"So I've been thinking—"

"Did it hurt?"

I roll my eyes. "Why do you make things so difficult?"

I can't see him but I've known him long enough to be able to tell when he's smirking. "I'm your older brother. It's my job to hold you accountable for everything."

"Do me a favor and take a break every once in a while."

"No promises." He chuckles. "What have you been thinking about?"

"We can't just leave Boris's threat unanswered. We need to figure out a way to answer without escalating the situation further."

"This is Boris Sobakin we're talking about. He is the king of escalation."

"And I'm the king of this fucking city. So I guess we need to figure out who has the bigger crown."

There's a beat of silence. "And what if it turns out he does?"

My jaw clenches hard. "Then I'll just have to knock it right off his head. And if that doesn't work, I'll remove his head altogether."

"Finally. Something we can agree on."

“I’ll be over in the night to discuss things.”

“I’ll organize dinner.”

“Don’t bother. I’ll probably be over late.”

“Oh? Got big plans?”

I grit my teeth. He’s fishing and the more I avoid telling him what my plans are, the more he’s going to suspect that my plans revolve around Alyssa. Which, in this case, is accurate.

“I’ll see you tonight,” I say vaguely, trying to put an end to the conversation before he asks about—

“And the girl?” he blurts, ignoring my attempt. “What’s the latest there?”

I’m in the process of trying to figure out an appropriate response when I hear her heels on the staircase. I turn around and my body tenses up. At the same time, all this adrenaline floods through me.

My fucking God, is she gorgeous.

I’ve seen her naked. And I’ve seen her bundled up like she’s about to go out in the middle of a snowstorm. But I’ve never seen her like *this*.

All dressed up. Sexy dress, high heels, makeup. I see acres of bare skin I want to lick and bite, blonde hair spilling over her shoulders that I can just picture winding around my fist, and her eyes, sparkling with mischief and promise.

The sight of her alone is enough to make me hard as a fucking rock.

Nikolai clears his throat. It takes a few seconds for his voice to register with me. “Uri? Hello... are you there?”

I don’t take my eyes off Alyssa. “I’ve got everything under control,” I growl just before I cut the line while he’s still talking.

I’m vaguely aware of the irony of my words considering just how out of control my body is made by the mere sight of her. Another reason that this spontaneous “date night” idea of mine is probably a huge mistake.

It has to be a consequence of staying away from her these last two days. I'm basically an addict who'd stopped cold turkey. And now, we're smack dab in the middle of the dam breaking. No one has ever fallen off the wagon this hard.

She just looked so *lonely*, marooned out there in the garden on that picnic blanket. I watched her for an eternity before I couldn't hold back anymore. And even as I crossed the lawn toward her, fully aware deep in my bones that this was a terrible idea, it was so easy to convince myself that this was all part of the plan. That I was engendering trust to make her more compliant.

In other words, I was full of shit.

"Hi," she says, avoiding my gaze.

I swallow down my lust. "Are you wearing everything I sent?"

Alyssa scowls immediately. "Why? Do you wanna *check*?"

That's all it takes. Those five little words and my willpower snaps in half. I grab hold of her and shove her against the closest wall, trapping her against my body. Her startled little gasp only makes my cock jump eagerly.

"Don't mind if I do," I snarl in her ear as my nose trails the swell of her cheek.

She gasps again and I can feel the goosebumps on her skin erupt beneath my fingertips. She looks up at me, all wide-eyed and breathless, those plump lips of hers parted ever so slightly. How the fuck am I supposed to resist *that*?

She's the first and only woman who's ever had me thinking, *I can't. I'm only fucking human.*

I lick the side of her neck while my hand slips up her dress. I have to give myself a pat on the back with this dress. She looks like a dream—but a dream that I can put my *hands* on. It's all too easy to slide under her skirt and trace the edge of her lacy underwear.

"U-Uri..."

She doesn't finish her sentence. That's all she drops. Just my name. Does she want me to stop? Does she want me to *never*

stop? That remains to be seen.

I push her panties aside and yes, my little *kiska* has definitely followed orders. Her pussy lips are pushed apart by the small silver vibrator.

“What a good little kitten you are.”

She grits her teeth but her eyelashes flutter wildly. “I... I didn’t do it for you.” She bites down on her bottom lip as she tries to push out her obviously-rehearsed line. “I did it for s-sushi...”

I chuckle darkly, nipping at her neck with my teeth. “We’ll see about that.”

I pull back so that I can see her expression. Then I slide a finger inside her, right over the vibrator. Her mouth forms a perfect little O as she gawks back at me with wide eyes. I push my finger in further and a startled moan escapes those juicy lips.

“How does that feel?”

She’s biting down as a shiver courses through her. “It f-feels... *aah...*”

Smiling with triumph, I toy with her clit as she struggles to stay on her feet. She’s clutching me now, on the verge of losing control. For every moment that she tries to push me away, there’s another two or ten moments where she’s pulling me in.

The back of her head is leaned against the wall. When her eyes flutter, I know that she’s close. Which is why I bend, pop a kiss onto her stunning cleavage...

And then pull my finger out entirely.

Alyssa’s eyes flash open. She doesn’t say anything, but her eyebrows pull together and her lips pinch together.

“Did you really think I was gonna let you come so easily?” Her eyebrows rise. “It’s not your turn yet, little one. If you want pleasure, you’ll have to give pleasure first.”

Her eyes flash and brighten at the same time. She's not irritated—she's excited. I put my hands on her shoulders and push her down onto her knees. She starts undoing my zipper eagerly as though she's ravenous for my cock.

Her earlier self-consciousness has completely disappeared, burned away in the fire of how bad she wants this. There's nothing shy about the way she engulfs my cock with her mouth and starts sucking eagerly.

“Yes... Fucking hell, more of that,” I groan as she plays with my balls and sucks.

She shows no signs of stopping or slowing down. So I place both my palms against the wall as my hips rock back and forth into her mouth. I clench my hands, my body tightening as the orgasm hits me faster than any I've ever had before.

And *fuck*, does it feel amazing. Has it ever felt that good?

Even as I explode inside her, she keeps sucking until there's nothing left in me. Only then do I pull out and zip myself back in. Then I offer her a hand and pull her up to her feet.

“That was quite the performance, Ms. Walsh.”

There it is—that sweet blush of hers. It amazes me how she can go from her knees, a cock slick in her mouth, to the self-conscious innocent in front of me now. Maybe that's why she's so fascinating to me. There's something intriguing about her obvious duality.

I reach into my coat pocket and pull out the small remote that I've been keeping safe for this very moment.

“What's that?” she whispers. Now, she looks scared.

I give her a cryptic smile that has her swallowing hard. “You'll just have to wait and see.”

Without elaborating, I take her hand and drag her towards the door, leaving behind all the doubts that have been creeping up on me ever since I first confined her to the basement.

All that's on my mind is that this is gonna be an interesting night.

ALYSSA

I feel so *dirty*.

But it's the good kind of dirty, if there's even such a thing.

The dress, the heels, the makeup—they're all doing wonders for my self-esteem and my confidence. But as sleek and sexy as I feel all dolled up, there's no denying the silver vibrator stuffed inside me or the fact that my mouth is coated with the salty-sweet tang of Uri's cum.

I can't help licking my lips as I step out of Uri's vintage Rolls Royce in front of the doors of Sakura.

The restaurant's black doors are inlaid with a pattern of cherry blossoms in pure ivory. This place is for fancy people, important people. This place is for women with fur stoles and personal shoppers. Not for a grubby little travel journalist who just swallowed a toxic man's seed half an hour ago and badly wants to do it again.

My heart is pinging loudly. *You do not belong here*, it's trying to tell me. *You do not belong in this world*.

That's never been clearer than when I walk into the crowded restaurant and all eyes turn to me. It really does feel like every head swivels in my direction. I take a step back and walk right into Uri's open hand. It settles on the small of my back and he pulls me closer.

"Uri, why is everyone staring?" I whisper.

"Because you're beautiful," he says in such a matter of fact way that I can't even argue. Then he leads me to a table in,

wouldn't ya know it, the very center of the restaurant.

As we make our way there, a few different men actually *stand up* as we pass. Some shake Uri's hand; others just give him a head nod. But almost everyone there acknowledges him in some way.

And it begs the question: *what the hell is going on?*

Uri slides the chair out for me before he sits down himself. A string quartet plays light music from the corner and the murmur of the other diners percolates through the dining room. But while it seems like everyone has just gone back to their own conversations, I can still feel the weight of their stares, their attention.

It's almost enough to make me forget that I'm literally wearing a sex toy.

"That was... weird."

Uri folds his hands together. "What was?"

"Are you kidding? What was that entrance? I'm surprised the whole restaurant didn't do a collective curtsy."

He snorts. "You're a dramatic one."

I just squint at him curiously. "Are you really *that* important? Or are you just that scary?"

"I'd like to think I'm both."

I glance to the side and catch one of the women from the adjacent table staring at me. She whips her head back around the moment I catch her. *Real subtle.*

"Who are all these people?"

Uri's gaze hasn't once veered to any of the other tables. Maybe he's just being a gentleman and focusing his attention on me. But I have a feeling it's more than that. It feels like a power move. *I'm way too important to be interested in any of you.*

Uri shrugs. "Some are *vors*; some are business colleagues; some are simply acquaintances."

“You’re telling me that everyone here is connected to—” I lean in and pull my voice down to a whisper. “—the *mob*?”

He glowers at me. “The Bratva,” he says haughtily. “It’s a totally different beast.”

“Oh, for God’s sake. Every bad guy likes to think they’re the first to ever do it. You all break laws, sell drugs, make a bunch of money in all kinds of illegal ways. So tell me the difference.”

He leans in towards me with an irresistible grin on his face. “The difference is that we never get caught.”

Not gonna lie—that one sends a shiver down my spine. I take another peek around the restaurant and I catch more sets of eyes on us. “You brought me here to make some sort of point, didn’t you?”

He leans back a little and regards me curiously.

“Well?” I press.

“You’re the first one of my dates to ever ask me that question.”

Oh, great. Now, I know he’s brought other women to this place. Which means at least *some* of the looks I’m getting are more judgmental than curious.

I’m just the newest flavor of the month.

Blech.

“I’m not like your other dates,” I snap. “I’ve actually got a brain up here and, believe it or not, my life’s goal has never been to be arm candy to some guy, no matter how rich or powerful or influential he might be.”

Uri regards me coolly. “You seem upset.”

“Who, me?” I ask in a voice that’s way too high-pitched. “Not at all. I’m just dandy.”

His lips are pulling up a little. I swear to God, if he smiles, I’m gonna chuck my glass of water in his face. I’m being made to look like a fool.

“Did you think you were the only one I brought here?”

I purse my lips together. “I’ll admit, it was stupid of me to make the assumption that this dinner was for my benefit.”

“You need to relax, Alyssa.”

I can feel the heat rush to my face. “*Don’t* tell me to relax. I have no interest in being a pawn in your weird little power games. This isn’t dinner; this is a fucking dog-and-pony show. Meant to show that *you*—”

My words are consumed by a gasp. I grip the edge of the table and try to make sense of what’s happening. It takes me a few seconds, but eventually, I realize that the vibrator inside me is living up to its name, giving off a subtle quiver that I can feel thrumming up my body in subtle little bursts.

I stare open-mouthed at Uri, waiting for an explanation. His eyes are trained on me, bright with intention as he twists his hand around and opens his palm to reveal the little remote that he showed me earlier.

My mouth pops open. “Y-*you’re* controlling the vibrator?” He nods as I grit my teeth and try to sit still so no one else notices what’s happening. “Well, stop it!”

“Like I said, you really need to relax.”

I try to grab the remote but he pulls it out of my reach smoothly. “Now, now, Alyssa, behave yourself. We’re in public.”

“You’re an asshole!”

He leans in so close that I can smell his cologne. “I’ve brought *a lot* of other women to this restaurant—” If it weren’t for the vibrator dancing around in my pussy, I’d have popped him one across that smug face. “—and none of them have ever called me an asshole. You don’t have to worry about being one of many, Alyssa. You’re not. You’re one of one.”

I’m not sure if it’s the vibrator or his eyes or the way he says those words but, God help me, it feels suspiciously like a compliment.

The vibrating stops and I sigh with relief. “Can I have the remote, please?” I croak.

“Not a fucking chance.”

I grit my teeth. “Is this your usual M.O.? Force all your dates to wear vibrators so that you can win every argument at the push of a button?”

He snorts. “You’re the first woman I’ve made wear a vibrator to dinner. And as for winning every argument: the women I tend to date don’t argue.”

I squirm in my seat. On top of being annoyed, I’m now soaking wet, too. I wish I could say it was solely the vibrator’s fault, but that’d be a lie by omission. Uri himself has an awful lot to do with it. How is it possible that I want to slap him and kiss him at the same damn time?

“How nice. That must have been so much more comfortable for you.”

“It was,” he says without missing a beat.

“Well, then you should have just asked one of those women out tonight instead of me.”

He smiles slowly. “The thing is, I’d much rather be triggered than comfortable.”

I can feel my body heat up. It doesn’t really help with the situation I’ve got going down south, either.

“I... trigger you?”

He glances at me, his expression giving nothing away. “You aren’t them, Alyssa. You aren’t them by a fucking mile.”

Is that a bad thing? A good thing? I have no freaking clue and I’m worried that asking will make me sound weak and pathetic. So I just sit there and brood, wishing that I could get just a glimpse of what’s going on inside that head of his.

Right when the eye contact between us is getting to be too much, I feel the vibrator start up again. I hadn’t even noticed him push the button. I wiggle in my seat and bite my lip so hard I wonder if it’s going to bleed.

But soon, even that can't hide the moans.

"Stop..." I stammer. "U-Uri..."

He just smiles calmly, the picture of suave control. But when I lean back and glance at his lap, I realize he's hard as a rock.

"It's not gonna stop until I say so, little one. You'll simply have to sit there and take it."

My chest feels like it's about to explode. All the anger I felt a moment ago has dissipated completely. Maybe it's how he's never done *this* with a woman before. Maybe it's how I can't resist him.

All I know is that I can't be angry any longer. How can I be when he's looking at me like that?

I may regret this ten years from now. I may regret it tomorrow. But for right now, it's worth it. Even if holding his undivided attention for ten minutes is all I'm gonna get, I'll take those ten minutes.

And I'll make sure he remembers them for the rest of his life.

Even after I'm no longer in it.

ALYSSA

He teases me throughout the entire dinner.

I never know when the vibrator's gonna start up again. I never know what setting it'll be on. The only thing I know is that he's nowhere close to being done with me.

The salted dark chocolate mousse with thimbleberries hits the table and Uri's eyes dart straight to me. "Dessert has always been my favorite part of every dinner," he growls in a raspy voice that makes me think he has a totally different thing in mind when he says "dessert."

He drapes his hand on my leg and glides it up to my thigh. My goosebumps haven't gone down since we've arrived, and the more he cranks up the vibrator, the less capable I am of producing anything that resembles coherent speech.

"Did you enjoy dinner, *narushitel*?"

I nod dumbly, waiting for the next round to start up again. So far, I've done a great job of curbing my reactions. I've turned my moans and gasps into coughs, laughs, sneezes—you name it, I've tried it. I have no idea if I've been convincing or not. At this point, I've lost all objectivity.

I'm also slowly losing any semblance of *give-a-fuck* energy.

My panties have been drenched since appetizers. I'm sore and throbbing down there and I really, *really* need a release. He's pushed me right up to the edge half a dozen different times at this very table and every single time, he pulled back just before I blew.

I'm not sure whether to be pissed off about that or not. On the one hand, I really don't think I can handle having a full-blown orgasm in a crowded restaurant surrounded by a bunch of Russian mobsters.

On the other hand, I would very much like to come, please.

"Go on," he encourages. "Try the mousse. I'll bet you it's the best thing you'll ever put in your mouth."

That statement alone kicks the throbbing in my core up a notch. I pick up a spoon and try the mousse, aware he's watching me the whole time. It's thick and rich and chocolatey, with just the right amount of pop from the thimbleberries and just the right amount of spice from the salt.

"Well?" he asks when I lick my lips.

"It's amazing. Sinfully delicious. But you're still the best thing I've ever put in my mouth."

Shylyssa, Shmylyssa, right? Don't ask me where that came from, because I have no clue. Apparently, neither does Uri, because his eyes go wide.

Rather than be embarrassed, however, seeing his reaction fills me with this bursting sense of euphoria.

He may have the control... but I'm not *totally* without power.

Of course, he tests that theory of mine a second later when he turns on the vibrator again. I twitch in place and look up at him helplessly.

"Go on," he croons. "Finish your dessert."

So I do. Every mouthful of thick, gooey mousse tastes so much more exotic somehow. It's like the vibrator between my thighs is enhancing every sound, smell, and taste. By the time I'm finished with my little mason jar, I'm worried that I've soaked through the seat.

"You wear the vibrator well."

I bite down on my bottom lip. "U-Uri," I gasp. "I think I... I'm gonna—"

His hand slides over my thigh and he digs his fingers into my skin as he snarls, “You will not come until I say you can.”

That should piss me off.

It only makes me wetter.

Is this what I’ve been missing in my sex life all this time? I’ve only ever slept with mild-mannered men who had sex like they did everything in life—traditionally and meekly.

But what I really needed was a man who would take charge. A man who would boss me around, push me around, tease me, take me, *fuck* me. A man who made me feel like the stakes were high and the risk was worth it.

“Okay,” I gasp, jerking in place and causing quite a few heads to swivel in our direction. *Fuck you people; I don’t care anymore.* “Okay, I won’t...”

“Such a good girl.”

My eyelashes flutter at him. “A-are you going to reward me... *mmm...?*”

I grip the edges of the table as the vibrator starts working in a new pattern. Any faster and I’m gonna be coming all over the place whether Uri likes it or not.

“Of course, baby.” Then the vibrator stops cold and Uri gives me a satisfied smile as disappointment floods my face. “But not just yet.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I whine. “We’ve just spent two hours at this table with me on the verge of—”

“Coming?” he interrupts, offering me his hand.

I swallow and slip my hand into his. He leads me through the restaurant and, just like when we entered, every pair of eyes are on us again. This time, he doesn’t stop to talk to anyone or shake hands. He just strides past with me bobbing along in his wake.

“Where are we going?” I ask in a hushed voice as Uri steers me in the direction of a black door on the opposite side of the restaurant. “Isn’t the exit over—”

He pushes the door open and I find myself standing in a gorgeous greenhouse garden, chaotically overrun with flowers in every shade and green vines winding around every available surface. It smells incredible, fresh and fragrant and clean. We follow a thin stream that slices down the middle of the space down to a bench set in a patch of verdant grass.

Uri glances back at me, one eyebrow arched as he asks, “Can you handle a walk down to the fountain?”

“I can handle anything you dish out.”

He smirks and pulls me along. I try my best to keep up, but there are moments when I feel like I’m about to burst. Despite how gorgeous it is out here, no one’s around. And with each passing moment, I relax.

Well, as much as you can relax when there’s a vibrator making you walk funny.

Uri stops at the bench. The stream bubbles a few feet away, flowing towards a tiny pond pockmarked every now and then with fat orange koi fish exploring the surface.

“So did you make your point?” I ask, gesturing towards the restaurant.

He smirks. “Yes.”

“Care to tell me what that point was?”

“That no matter what happens, nothing affects the Bugrov Bratva.”

A little chill runs down my back when he says that. *Bugrov Bratva*. You don’t have to know much about Uri or his operation to feel the weight that underpins that name.

“Doesn’t it get... I dunno, tiring?”

He frowns. “It’s my job.”

“Is that another way of saying you’re always in control no matter what?”

Uri observes me with a curious expression on his face. “I *have* to be in control.”

I shake my head. “No, you *like* being in control. There’s a difference.”

“Both things can be true.”

“Which one is truer?”

He smirks as he reels me in closer to him. “Right now? The second one.”

He pulls my dress up so high that I’m afraid he’s going to expose my ass to anyone who might be watching. I jerk away from him and yank down the hem. “What are you doing?”

He pulls me right back into his chest. “Reminding you that *you* like when I’m in control, too.”

“N-not here,” I stutter, looking around in panic. “We’re out in public. People will see.”

His eyebrows lift. “So?”

I try to push him away again, but it doesn’t make the slightest bit of difference. He might as well be a stone pillar rooted to the ground. “I can’t, Uri... not here...”

“What did I tell you about tonight?” he demands as his eyes get really dark.

I bite my lip. “My adventure, your rules.”

“Correct. My rules. And if you want to come tonight, you’re gonna have to follow them.”

“You’re all about controlling what I want,” I blurt suddenly. “But what do *you* want?”

His eyes flash with desire. He turns and sits on the bench, adjusting his position so that his erection is very obvious. “Do I need to explain?”

No, Mr. Bugrov, you do not. I don’t need him to do anything else. I drop down to my knees, pull his zipper down, and just like that, I’m having my second dessert of the night.

Uri’s cock is hitting the back of my throat when I feel the vibrator buzz to life again. *Oh, God, am I gonna survive this*

night? Even as the vibrations shiver up, I keep sucking, getting faster and faster as the vibrator settings kick up a notch.

At some point, my fear of someone stumbling upon us disappears. It probably has something to do with the fact that I'm just struggling to breathe. While I'm sucking, Uri leans right over me and slips his hand over my pussy. He starts playing with my outer lips while the vibrator goes crazy.

At least I'm not being noisy. Uri's dick does a good job of stifling my screams. Just when I feel his body start to spasm, he pulls the vibrator out of me.

Ah, sweet relief.

But also, strange emptiness.

Before I can process what's happening, Uri's pulling me off my knees and onto his lap. His eyes lock onto mine. "Time to fill you up with a real cock, *kiska*." He slaps my ass hard. "Let's see how much you can handle."

I'm not sure myself but still, I grab his slick erection and slide it inside me. I start pushing my hips against him, desperate for the high that I've been chasing for the past two hours. Just a little more, another few thrusts...

"Yes! Yes! Yes!"

I'm screaming. But I don't care. The only thing that matters is that orgasm. The only thing that matters is *him*.

He keeps his hands on my ass; my eyes close and my body spasms violently. And then, *thankfuckinglygod*, I come so hard that I let loose a scream that sounds more Agatha Christie murder mystery than *Fifty Shades of Gray*.

Whatever. I've *earned* this orgasm. I'll celebrate it however I damn well please.

I grip his neck, my lips resting against his forehead as I come down from the high. There's an unsettled unfurling in my stomach that I can't quite decipher.

Could it be that we've had unprotected sex for the third time in a row?

Could it be that the hole I've had inside me since Ziva's death feels smaller than it's ever been?

Maybe it's how I'm starting to realize that, as much as I may want this man, I know deep in my bones that I can't have him.

Or maybe it's that, despite all the reasons I should've hopped that fence again and ran screaming for the hills...

I still don't regret staying.

URI

“Say that again.”

I throw Alyssa a disbelieving glance while she giggles. “I’m serious. He *wanted* to learn.”

“He wanted to learn how to knit?” I repeat. “Lev. My brother?”

She gives me a satisfied smirk. “Mhmm. He walked into my room yesterday while I was knitting and he was really interested. So I’m starting classes tomorrow.”

My first thought is, *He’s just walking into your room now?* Instead, I shake my head. “I’ll have to see that to believe it.”

She shrugs. “He may like it; he may hate it. But I think it’s a positive sign that he wants to try something new.”

“The little suck-up doesn’t want to try something new. He just wants to be close to you.”

Can’t really blame him.

“I know,” she says softly. “I enjoy spending time with him.”

As I drive into the estate, I notice a car parked just outside on the turntable.

Fuck.

“Uri, I just wanted to thank you for taking me out tonight. I know that...”

She keeps talking but I’m not listening anymore. I’m staring at Niko’s silhouette, leaning against the entrance wall that leads

to the house. Of course he opted to stand outside and wait for me. He wanted to know exactly what I was up to.

Alyssa seems to have caught on that something's up because she's stopped talking. Instead, she's looking at me curiously. "Uri? Something wrong?"

"Everything's fine," I say in a voice too brusque to be believed.

I park haphazardly on the drive and get out of the car. Alyssa follows me towards the house in silence. I can see her adjusting her dress from my peripheral vision. She looks like a woman who's been recently ridden hard and put away wet—which, to be fair, is accurate.

"Little brother," Nikolai greets in an amused murmur.

When I stop in front of Nikolai, Alyssa stops next to me. I give her only a cursory glance. "Go to bed. The evening's over."

She flinches instantly, hurt pooling in her eyes so fast that I want to kick my own ass. She glances at Nikolai, then back at me. Then, with a clenched jaw, she enters the house.

My brother watches her walk away the whole time. As much as I would like to, I don't stop him. Purely because I know that's exactly what he wants me to do.

Only when she's disappeared does he turn back to me with raised eyebrows and a knowing expression. "She's pretty."

I roll my eyes, trying to look less guilty. "I told you I would come to you."

"And I can see why. Did the two of you have a nice evening?"

I push past him and head towards my office. My good mood has just been reduced to ash in a matter of seconds. I don't speak again until we're in my office and I've got a glass of vodka in my hand.

"Are you going to tell me what's going on?" Nikolai asks, breaking the silence.

I take a sip of my drink. "What's going on is that Boris needs a little—"

“No,” Nikolai interrupts sharply, “I’m not talking about Sobakin. I’m talking about your pretty little prisoner.”

I clench my teeth, but my answer still comes too fast and too insistently. “Nothing’s going on there.”

Nikolai scoffs. “Come on, *brat*. You dressed her up and took her out for dinner? Not to mention that she’s living in the house now, in one of the guest bedrooms?”

“It was necessary. Lev was getting antsy and I didn’t want to push him towards a full-scale breakdown.”

Nikolai’s eyes go wide. “So Lev knows about her?”

“He broke into the basement and found her. It was out of my hands.”

“And Polina?”

“Pol has no idea. Which is why, on the weekends that Polly’s here, Alyssa’s going back down into the basement.”

“What if Lev lets slip?”

I grit my teeth. “I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.”

“That seems to be the party line these days.”

Mother used to say that Nikolai and I were too alike and that’s why we butted heads all the time. These days, I think it’s more because he’s a condescending prick.

He’s not finished yet, either. “Tell me honestly, brother: are you getting attached?”

Something inside me roars with indignation. Me? Attached? To a woman? *Fuck no*. “She’s a plaything, nothing more.” Why do those words feel so wooden and rehearsed? So utterly and obviously bullshit? Instead of letting Nikolai point that out, I change the subject. “Need I remind you that you’re here so that we can discuss Sobakin, not so that you can grill me about Alyssa?”

Niko is unmoved. “Both things concern me.”

“Neither one should. I’m handling the situation with Alyssa and I have a plan for Boris.”

That gets his attention. “Do you?”

“The Black Rose. The whole city knows it’s just a front for his drug ring. If we stage a little ambush like we’ve been planning, take down a few of his men in the process, we can remind him of who exactly he’s dealing with.”

Nikolai cocks an eyebrow. “We’ve been over this, Uri. We can’t just launch an attack on a popular nightclub without the cops getting involved.”

“You forget about Vincent.”

“Imbroglia?”

I nod. “LAPD has been tipped off about Sobakin’s drug ring but he’s too powerful for them to deal with. They’ve tried a handful of underground sting operations that have failed. So if we wanna get a little messy in the Black Rose, the police department is willing to turn a blind eye.”

Nikolai has that constipated look on his face that usually means he’s impressed but doesn’t want to admit it. “What about Igor? You’re sure he’s dead?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because if I were Boris, I’d have gutted him the first chance I got.”

Nikolai sighs. Then he finishes his vodka and salutes me with the empty glass. “We can nail the fucker to the floor. As long as we can stay clear of... distractions.”

I grimace. *Subtlety has never been Nikolai’s strong suit.* But, for all his other flaws, he knows when to take his exit.

After he’s left, I wander upstairs, intending to go straight to my room. But somehow, I end up in front of Alyssa’s door instead. Nikolai’s words keep reverberating in my head. As much as I hate to admit it, Alyssa has become a distraction.

I thought that sleeping with her would curb my desire, but it’s had the exact opposite effect. The more I have her, the more I crave her.

I made a promise to myself a long time ago that, when it came to my older brother, I would do everything in my power to prove him wrong.

Today is the first time I've intentionally broken that promise.

Instead of moving on like I ought to do, I rip open her door and walk in. She's spread diagonally across the bed, having kicked her cover sheet right off. Which is why I can tell immediately that she's naked.

She's sleeping on her side, her breasts squished between her arms. Tiny, fragile—fucking beautiful. My semi turns into a raging hard-on. My body is demanding it gets the fix it's looking for.

Might as well make use of the pill. This will be the last time.

But unlike the first few times I made that promise to myself, I don't believe it anymore. It's become laughable at this point. I strip down and get into bed beside her. I caress her gently until she's half-awake and blinking at me in confusion.

“Uri...?”

There's an open-eyed innocence in the way she says my name. It does shit to me that no woman's words ever have before.

I kiss my way down to her breasts and suck on her nipples until her body is wrapped around mine. She starts kissing me back, her tight little body pushing closer and closer.

Apparently, she hasn't had enough either.

So for the second time in one night, I push myself inside of her. I mean to be fast and hard. I mean to split her down the middle, get mine, and then cast her aside. That's what's for the best, right? That's the kind of man my Bratva and my responsibilities demand that I be.

But my body has other plans.

We rock back and forth together—slow and measured. Gentle. Tender. At one point during the fucking that doesn't feel like fucking, I meet her eyes and hold her gaze.

I tell myself this doesn't mean anything. I tell myself what I told Nikolai: *she's just my plaything. I'm in control.*

But my heartbeat is strumming a different song. And it sounds like a warning.

It's saying...

You're fucked.

ALYSSA

You're gonna be okay, Alyssa.

Those were the first words Ziva said to me after her diagnosis. The doctor walked out of the hospital room and the first thing she did was grab my hand, look me in the eye, and say those words.

That's when it struck me that I was the one crying even though she was the one dying.

I didn't even question it at the time. All I could think was, *How was I ever gonna be okay without her?*

Towards the end, she made me promise to live for the both of us. *Travel the world, Aly. Throw yourself into life. Be brave. Be curious. Be wild. Be reckless. Do it all. Really live, okay? Do it for the both of us.*

That's what I always thought I was doing. Traveling was my way of keeping my promise to Ziva. But lying here in a bed that's not mine, in a house that's not mine, I'm forced to reconsider.

No—meeting Uri has forced me to reconsider.

Because the truth is, not until a few days ago did an ugly thought start to fester in the back of my mind: *Have I been hiding behind my career?* I may have seen almost a hundred different countries, but have I made any new friends? Have I had any significant relationships? Have I explored my sexuality? Have I discovered who I really am?

Last night, I wore a vibrator to dinner and had public sex with a man I've only known for a few weeks. Sure, there was an element of recklessness, of danger, but none of it felt uncomfortable. None of it felt wrong.

It makes me wonder if Ziva's death caused me to recede so far within myself that I started to feel uncomfortable in my own skin. The amateur therapist in me seems to agree.

Although, when it comes to the topic of Uri Bugrov, even the amateur therapist in me is stumped.

The man changes moods so fast that he gives me friction burn. He went from totally ignoring me for two days, to taking me out for a very sexually charged dinner, to dismissing me abruptly right afterwards, to waking me up in the middle of the night to have more hot, sweaty, yet surprisingly tender sex.

How the hell am I supposed to keep up with that?

I was so annoyed with him last night after he basically sent me off to my room like a naughty child that I fell asleep all riled up and determined. I was *not* gonna spread my legs for him ever again. I was gonna draw a line in the sand. I was gonna start saying no!

So of course, he'd decided to slip into my bed when I was at my most vulnerable and fuck me into changing my mind.

It's just... the sex was so different last night. For the first time, it felt like we were *sharing* control. Our eyes were locked together as we finished at the same time.

He left my bed almost immediately after, but this time, it didn't bother me. Probably because I knew it would most likely happen again. I *wanted* it, too. That's what I woke up thinking. That's what I've spent the last half-hour contemplating.

But I'm getting awfully sick of tossing and turning and contemplating problems that have no obvious solutions, so I drag myself out of bed, get dressed, and go downstairs. I'm rounding the corner into the kitchen when I hear something crash.

“*NO!* I don't want... I don't want—”

I rush into the kitchen to find Svetlana standing a few feet away from Lev, who's on the floor twitching violently and shaking his head fast.

“Master Lev—”

“I don't want it!” he yells again. “Cornflakes! I want cornflakes!”

Svetlana's eyes are wide and agitated. Every time she tries to take a step towards Lev, he just starts shaking harder, forcing her to back away further. “I'm sorry, Master Lev. We ran out —”

“No, no, no, no...”

I jump forward and put my hand on Svetlana's shoulder. She turns to me helplessly and lowers her voice. “Mr. Bugrov said specifically that I wasn't to give him cornflakes for breakfast today. He told me to give him something more substantial, so I made a quiche and—” She looks at Lev regretfully.

“It's okay, Svetlana. Let me try.”

She backs off instantly, relief brightening her face as she makes her getaway. I inch a little closer to Lev, who hasn't stopped rocking in place.

“Lev. Hello? Lev, buddy?”

He jerks slightly in my direction, so I know he hears me. But he doesn't lift his head, nor does he stop the shaking. “Lev, I'm right here,” I murmur. “I'm right here. Just listen to my voice, okay?”

He stiffens. Says nothing. But I could swear the shaking slows, just a bit.

“I know everything feels terrible right now. I know it's overwhelming. Change always is. But you're strong enough to handle it. And you know where it starts?”

He still doesn't look at me but he shakes his head in answer. I scoot a little closer to him until I'm only half a foot away. Then I squat down in front of him. “It starts with a breath. That's it—just one little breath. You can do that, right?”

He gives me a single, tight nod.

“Can we breathe together?”

Another nod.

“Can you look at me first?”

Ever so slowly, he lifts his head and meets my eyes for a split second before dropping his chin back to his chest. I wait patiently until he looks at me again. I give him a reassuring smile. “See? I’m right here with you.”

He swallows, his hands tightening around his legs. But the shaking has slowed. “One big breath. You and me. Let’s do this.”

I inhale and so does he. Then exhale slowly and he follows suit. “Again.” We repeat the process again and again until the shaking stops altogether.

“There you go. See? You’re okay.”

He frowns and knuckles away the tears streaking his cheeks. “I want cornflakes.”

I’m half-tempted to ignore Uri’s orders and cave. But I know that falling back onto Lev’s demands won’t help him in the long run.

“Lev, look at me please. Do you trust me?”

He frowns and I’m struck with the horrible thought that he might not trust me. It’s a big ask for anyone, let alone someone as vulnerable as Lev.

“I... think so...”

Good enough. “Then trust me when I tell you that not having cornflakes this morning is not gonna hurt you.”

The shaking starts again.

“Lev, take another deep breath with me,” I say quickly. “In. Out. Good. That’s so good.”

As he breathes, I make eye contact. “You know what always made me feel better on a rough morning? Chocolate chip pancakes!”

He looks at me skeptically. “C-chocolate?” he hiccups.

“Oh, big time. I’m not the greatest cook but I do make the best chocolate chip pancakes in the city, maybe even in the whole entire *world*. You wanna try them?”

He considers it for a moment and then he nods slowly. *Victory!* I’m clapping myself on the back for this one.

I get to my feet and offer him my hand. He takes it, and by “takes it,” I mean he slips one finger onto my palm like a shy child. I turn around to make sure he’s okay—and freeze.

Uri is standing at the entrance of the kitchen, watching the two of us with a brooding gaze. Lev stiffens and his eyes flicker to the broken glass lying in a heap of shards a few feet away.

I ignore that. “Lev and I were just about to make pancakes. Want some?”

Uri nods coolly. “Sure.”

Lev and Uri sit down beside each other and watch me make my not-so-famous chocolate chip pancakes. I keep up a patter of light banter through the pancake-making process. Partly because I want Lev to feel at ease, but also because I’m very conscious that Uri’s eyes are following me religiously.

By the time I dole out the sweet-smelling pancakes onto three plates, Lev is actually smiling. “I want more.”

Uri chuckles. “You haven’t even tried one yet.”

“I’ll like them,” Lev insists.

It’s enough to make me tear up. I watch as Lev dives into the pancakes, smearing his mouth with chocolate after only a couple of bites. It’s the only review I need. Lev gobbles down the three thick pancakes I’ve served him and then holds out his plate for more, *Oliver Twist* style.

He’s chowing down on his second helping when I turn to Uri, who makes no secret of the fact that he’s staring at me thoughtfully.

“Did you like them?” I ask shyly.

“Best pancakes in the entire world,” he replies deadpan.

I smile self-consciously, determined not to let things backslide into silence. His gaze is so much harder to deal with in the silence. “Thanks. I workshopped the recipe quite a bit. The secret is—”

“I want to take you out again.”

My body erupts with tingles. “Out?” I repeat stupidly.

He nods as Lev looks up at his brother and chirps, “I want to come, too.”

Uri’s head swivels in Lev’s direction in shock. “You do?”

Lev nods, though a little uncertainly this time. His gaze veers slowly to me. “Only if Alyssa is coming, though.”

Uri’s eyes are wide. I’m gonna go out on a limb here and guess that Lev asking to go out is not a common occurrence. But judging from the little furrow in Uri’s brow, I’d also guess that he is more reluctant than excited about that small inch of progress.

“If you really want to, you can come with us,” Uri decides mildly. “But only for an hour or so. You have physical therapy today and you can’t miss it.”

Lev nods and starts in on his last pancake. Uri’s eyes find mine and there it is again—that heated eye contact. That pregnant silence.

I break both by grabbing Uri’s empty plate. “I’ll just get these out of the way.”

I’m standing at the sink, washing his plate by hand when I feel him at my back. He slides in right behind me without actually touching me. His lips are at my ear, his breath gently stroking my neck.

“Thank you.”

Then, without another word, he leaves.

ALYSSA

First things first—I need to get changed.

But the moment I enter the walk-in closet, I stop short. Something's not right. Or depending on your perspective, something is *very* right. The half-empty racks, shelves, and open cupboards are no longer half-empty. There's a wealth of new clothes staring back at me, blinding me with their shiny new fabric and their shiny new labels.

I do a slow lap. Dresses from Valentino. Pants from Prada. Bags from Gucci. Heels from Louboutin. My head is spinning.

Some of the fabrics feel too luxurious to touch, let alone wear.

After combing through the entire wardrobe, I find my old clothes folded away in a small corner of the walk-in. Something about knowing that I could always fall back on what I know makes me feel more willing to branch out into this strange new world of French and Italian luxury.

So I turn back and pick an outfit from my upgraded closet, opting for a black Balenciaga miniskirt that's entirely too cool for me and a snowy white Saint Laurent sweater blouse. I pair the two with leather buckled Jimmy Choo boots. The Garfield underwear remains firmly tucked in its drawer.

Then I spend a few minutes in front of the mirror, marveling at the woman staring back at me.

This chick is *cool*.

Taking a deep breath, I strut over to the door. I'm only halfway down the stairs when Uri appears at the landing. He's wearing

dark, slim-fitting jeans and a dark sweater that hugs his sculpted chest perfectly. He's also wearing a knowing smile that's all for me.

"You look beautiful, *narushitel*."

It's a fairly conservative compliment, at least compared to some of the things he whispered in my ear during last night's midnight fuck, but the way he's looking at me is far from chaste. My heart races as I try not to blush.

"You went shopping for me?"

He shrugs. "You needed clothes."

I frown. "I live right next door. I have a bunch of clothes over there that you could have brought over."

"You needed *better* clothes."

I roll my eyes. "Okay, you snob. You still didn't have to buy so much. I doubt I could wear that many outfits in one lifetime."

There's a glint in his eye that feels thrillingly possessive. "I wanted to spoil you."

I don't think any man I've ever been with has wanted to spoil me. I don't think that was even a thought in their head. I was lucky if they bought me dinner. More often than not, we split everything down the middle.

Not that I minded. Gender equality and all. I was happy to pay my own way. But I didn't really have anything to compare it with, either. And I have to admit, old-fashioned as it might be, there's just something about a man who's willing to pay for his woman, buy things for her, spoil her rotten.

Elle likes to say that it's another form of control. But to me, it says, *As long as you're mine, I'm gonna take care of you.*

What are you doing? I chide myself silently. *You're not his woman. You're not his anything. You're a prisoner at worst, a glorified house guest at best.*

It's hard to internalize that lecture when I'm busy internalizing how good he smells, though.

Lev saunters out of the basement a second later, looking a little shaky and very nervous. “I’m ready,” he announces.

I give him a wink. “I’m glad you’re coming with us.” That gets a blushy smile out of him.

As we move towards the door, Uri’s hand lands on the small of my back and despite my big lecture to myself, despite my better judgment, despite my logical sensibilities, all I can hear is—

As long as you’re mine, I’m gonna take care of you.

URI

Alyssa plucks off a grape from the bunch sitting on the charcuterie board and pops it into her mouth. I watch her chew for longer than is decent. She seems to be aware because, although she doesn't look at me, her cheeks redden and she swallows quickly.

Lev is scanning the area uncertainly, his body swaying from side to side. I've brought him to Palisades Park a few times before. Once, it went great; the other three times, not so much. The odds are not in our favor.

But I'm hoping that having Alyssa here might make a difference.

The woman is fucking incredible with him. I say that with the reservations of a protective older brother. She knows how to talk to him, how to handle him. She knows how to bring him down from the brink of an episode and she knows how to stop his fears in their tracks. She's gotten so damn good, so damn fast, that it actually pisses me off a little.

Why the hell did it take me so long? Why the hell is it still so difficult for me sometimes?

Every time I see her with Lev, my own adequacy is pulled to the forefront. Inadequacy is not something I'm accustomed to feeling. If this is what it's like to be mortal, I want no fucking part of it.

"Do we play now?" Lev asks, throwing me a furtive glance.

“Why don’t you eat something first, Lev?” Alyssa suggests. “Hey, watch me.” She grabs another grape and throws it into the air before catching it with her mouth. “Ta-da!”

Lev looks positively mesmerized. *He’s not the only one.* “Do it again!” he claps. “Again!”

Picnic 2.0 was my way of pivoting when Lev announced he wanted to come with us. What I had in mind for Alyssa and I could not involve him. So this is the happy compromise. A gourmet spread in Palisades Park to keep Lev happy. Somehow, it’s every bit as good.

Lev sees a nearby squirrel and crawls over to try feeding it grapes. I keep an eye on him as he goes, though without looking away, I say to Alyssa, “You’re amazing with him.”

In the corner of my eye, she blushes hard and does an alarmed double-take. “You think?”

The fact that she even asks floors me. “I’ve never seen anyone calm him down so fast. It’s like witchcraft. I haven’t decided yet whether to thank you or burn you at the stake.”

She laughs, then bites her lip and shakes her head. “I’m not trying to convince him to calm down. I just want him to know that I’m there for him even—no, *especially* when he feels like he’s losing control of himself.”

I swallow hard and try to look away from her.

But fuck me, I can’t.

That’s the entire problem.

She sighs. “He reminds me of myself sometimes.”

“Pardon?”

She nods. “What I saw in the kitchen this morning... That’s pretty much how I reacted the day we were handed down Ziva’s diagnosis. I curled up in a ball in the corner of my room and rocked back and forth for... I don’t even know how long. It was a long time, though.” She sighs. “Everyone may look at Lev and judge him, but the truth is, at the end of the day, he is all of us. Just... stripped down. Laid bare. The rawest, realest part of ourselves.”

I shudder. I have never seen it like that. I've never seen Lev like that.

My eyes veer towards him and I try the explanation on for size. *Fucking hell*. It fits. Or at least, it doesn't feel completely ridiculous. Maybe that's why people have such a hard time dealing with him. Why he faces so much ridicule when he leaves the safety of my walls.

No one wants to be confronted with their deepest, darkest fears.

"He's amazing, Uri," she says softly. "You're so lucky to have him."

I can hear the sadness in her voice. It's reflected in the watery haze passing over her eyes right now.

And something strikes me: maybe the reason Lev hasn't come across any decent human beings out in the wild is because he hasn't come across anyone as *kind* as Alyssa is.

And the moment that thought forms, I feel like a total fucking asshole.

Because the fact is, dinner last night wasn't *just* dinner. The clothes I've bought for her aren't *just* gifts. The outing this evening isn't *just* an outing. All of them serve their own purpose. All of them were orchestrated, manipulated so that I can prove—to my own men, but also and maybe even especially my enemies—that nothing is wrong. Everything is in order. The status quo hasn't changed and I'm still in control.

With everyone, it seems, *except* her.

I've never felt guilty about using any other woman to suit my needs. So why is it so fucking difficult with her?

Alyssa's chewing on her bottom lip as she observes Levi. "How long do you think he's going to sit there and wait for the squirrel to come down?"

"The record to date is two hours, eleven minutes."

"I'm not surprised." She smiles slowly. "I wonder what he's thinking right now."

All that does is make me wonder what *she's* thinking right now. Her hair cascades down one shoulder, fluttering gently in the light breeze. Those clothes suit her. She looks like she belongs on a runway.

I suppose that was my intention. If she and I were to be seen together—and that was certainly the point—she needed to look the part. She needed to look like the kind of woman I would be seen with: beautiful, sexy, stylish, damn near royal.

Honestly, I expected her to fight me a little more about it. Instead, she gave in easily. Surrendered herself to my control without ever questioning it.

And it's making me so fucking hard.

If I had my way, I'd push her down on this picnic blanket right now and tease her until she was begging me to fuck her. The public passing by us can get an eyeful or mind their own fucking business. But a certain squirrel-watching brother of mine would probably object.

“What?” Alyssa asks when she catches me staring at her.

“You're beautiful.”

Her blush only gets deeper. She pulls her hair out from behind her ear so that it creates a curtain that hides half her face from view. She clears her throat. “Maybe Lev could skip physical therapy just this once and come with us?”

I raise my eyebrows. “Are you scared to be alone with me, Alyssa?”

She swallows. “Should I be?”

“Definitely.”

URI

I love my brother. I would literally kill for him if I had to. But right now? The bastard is cockblocking me.

Where the hell are George and Svetlana? I've never been more eager to see the two of them before. If they don't come and scoop Lev away so I can have the little *narushitel* all to myself, I might go insane.

Alyssa hasn't made eye contact with me in several minutes. She's making a big show of coming off as calm and unflustered but her knuckles are white, her face is pinched, and her arms are prickled with goosebumps.

She's as much of a mess as I am.

Lev springs to his knees all of a sudden. "Hey! I saw him. I saw him!"

Alyssa beams—grateful for a distraction, I'm sure. "I wanna see, too!" She runs over to Lev and the two of them sit there and stare up at the tree as though it's gonna start shedding gold leaves.

I take the opportunity to adjust my erection so that it's not so obvious.

When the squirrel jumps to another tree, Lev follows. Alyssa ambles a few steps after him, then pauses. I follow behind and rest my hands on her hips. If I happen to grind myself against the curves of her ass while I do, well... that's just a happy accident.

Lev is now several feet away with his back to us, staring at another tree. With Alyssa's ass pressed against my groin, I slip one hand up her blouse and the other hand up her skirt. She reacts instantly, gasping and trying to get out from underneath my hold. I just jerk her right back into place.

"Uri, what are you doing? Not here."

"Why not?"

"Because we're in *public!*"

"That didn't seem to bother you last night."

Even her ears go red. "Lev is right over there."

I press my cock harder against her ass until she lets out a helpless little moan. "Lev is busy with his squirrel. And I'm done waiting."

I push her panties aside and slip my fingers inside her. She gasps again, arching her back a little, which is perfect because it gives me increased access to exactly where I want to be. She's sopping wet.

"Ahh, Uri..."

I bite down on her neck as I start working my fingers in and out of her. We're still completely exposed but I don't have the willpower to pretend I care anymore. I just want to fucking ravage her. And if the whole world has to watch...

Then so be it.

Lev steps towards the tree and Alyssa recoils in response. "Uri, we can't... *ahh*... we can't let him... see..."

Just so that she can relax a little more, I pull her back behind the tree and lean her against the thick trunk. Her mouth falls open and I have no choice but to bite down on that delicious plump lower lip. She moans into my kiss and I bear down hard against her clit until her body shivers with the heat of her oncoming orgasm.

I pull my fingers out of her, stopping the orgasm in its tracks. She gives me a look and mouths, *Asshole*. I smile and raise my

soaked fingers to my lips. Without breaking eye contact, I suck one into my mouth and taste her.

“You’re so fucking sweet, princess. Care for a taste?”

I offer a finger to her, still dripping with her desire. Her eyes get wider but her lips part automatically. She sucks in my fingers eagerly and doesn’t stop until they’re clean.

“Good girl. That’s my good little angel.”

“Uri! Alyssa!”

Lev’s voice is raised in panic, probably because he can’t see us anymore. Alyssa practically shoves me off her, pulls her skirt down into place, and steps out from behind the tree with a huge grin on her face.

“We’re right here, Lev! Don’t worry.”

I follow her to Lev who’s rushing towards us. “I thought you left me,” he mumbles, reaching for Alyssa’s hand.

I stand back and watch the two of them together. Their body language is relaxed and trusting. Lev even looks her right in the eye. This has to be at the root of my preoccupation with this woman, right? She’s good for him. *Great* for him.

But even as I think it, it feels more like an excuse than an explanation.

Thankfully, I notice the SUV in the distance. “Lev, your ride is here.”

Usually, he’s excited about going home to his safe place. But today, his mouth turns down at the corners. “But I want to stay with Alyssa.”

Not with me—with *Alyssa*.

I resist the urge to remind him that I was the one who carried his ass to the bathroom on nights he was too afraid to walk there himself. Instead, I pat his shoulder. “You’ll see Alyssa tomorrow, *brat*.”

He starts shaking his head in that deep swinging motion that tips me off that an episode might be coming. I’m about to go into damage control mode when Alyssa steps in front of me.

“You need your rest,” Alyssa chides gently. “And where we’re going is *super* boring. Honestly, I don’t even want to go but —” She lowers her voice and peeks over at me conspiratorially. “—your brother’s making me.”

Lev giggles. “You wish you were coming home with me, huh?”

“Oh, you have no idea,” she says with a little too much sincerity in that smug smile she’s wearing. She gives George and Svetlana a wave and then looks back at Lev. “Thanks for coming with us today.”

Lev gives her a jerky nod and pulls his hand out of hers. Then he bounds towards the SUV, jumping in without greeting either George or Svetlana. Alyssa stands there and waves until the vehicle is completely out of sight.

When she finally turns to me, I’m staring at her pointedly. “What?” she asks self-consciously.

“I’m ‘making you,’ huh?”

She smirks. “Could I have said no?”

“Would you have?”

She rolls her eyes. “You can’t answer a question with a question.”

“Can’t you?”

“Ugh,” she groans, attempting to turn away from me. Before she can get far, I grab her and tug her into me. She hits my chest with a soft little moan that gives my cock all sorts of ideas.

“Are you ready?” I ask.

“Ready for what?”

“This.” Then I kiss her like my fucking life depends on it.

I kiss her until she stops talking back, until her legs give out, until her eyes are unfocused and her breathing is ragged. I kiss her until her arms are wrapped around me tight. I kiss her until I can taste how badly she wants me.

It occurs to me that I should probably stop. But I can feel the wetness as I grind into her. She tastes sweet and hot and so fucking perfect.

I finally manage to pull away from her when my cock is about to break through my pants.

Alyssa's pupils are blown, her eyes glazed. Her lips are swollen and parted and her face is flushed with the kind of glow that comes from pure, unbridled passion.

Fucking hell. I need her now.

I take her hand and pull her towards where we parked the car. She follows, stumbling a little, but I keep her steady and help her in before slipping into the seat beside her. The windows are tinted dark enough that no one can see what I do next.

I pull her into my lap and rip her skirt up. My cock is hard and throbbing. My balls are aching and heavy.

She whimpers when I grab the crotch of her panties and yank them to the side. I spread her legs wide and rub my tip along the wet slit between her folds.

Then I push my way in.

Alyssa whines as I start to rock back and forth inside her. I don't give her time to get comfortable—I fuck her fast and hard and relentlessly, holding her legs apart until her thighs burn with the strain.

She pushes her palms into my chest and tries to catch her breath, but there is no rest. There is only pleasure.

There is only this.

My cock swells and lengthens inside her, and I can feel the cum churning up inside my balls. When she throws her head back again, her eyes are closed and her mouth is hanging open. She is lost. Lost to the feeling. Lost to the pleasure. Lost to me.

We rock together faster and faster, the car bouncing with our motion as the smell of sex and sweat gets denser. She is so fucking close to the peak.

So am I.

Then, right when it's about to happen, I slam my mouth onto hers, swallowing her scream. I feel the first burst of her orgasm and it pushes me over the edge.

I grunt as I bury myself in her. Her pussy clamps down on me, milking every last drop.

After what feels like an eternity, with a mournful sigh, I let her go. My eyes lull closed and Alyssa plasters herself against me.

We stay like that for a long time, drifting in and out of awareness. And then my attention focuses on something: Alyssa's fingers at the back of my head. She's curling them through my hair and it occurs to me out of absolutely fucking nowhere that this gesture is a billion times more intimate than anything I should be allowing. It's the most brutal post-orgasm clarity of my life. Like I'm only just now hearing the whole fucking chorus of voices in my head screaming, *THIS IS A MISTAKE*.

Bringing her into my world. Letting her see into the dark nooks and crannies. I told her about my *parents*, for fuck's sake. I let her bond with Lev. I let her bond with me!

And now, she thinks we can hold each other in a hot, sweaty car, still vibrating with each other's pleasure, and do things like stroke hair or hold hands.

I can't allow that.

Not for her sake.

Not for mine.

ALYSSA

Something shifts, and I don't know when it happened. One moment, we're having the best car sex in the history of vehicular fornication—the next, Uri is holding part of himself away from me. I can feel it, sense it, as surely as if he slammed a door in my face and pocketed the key.

The car ride home is silent. He says nothing and doesn't touch me as we park and get out. I'm heading up the stairs when Uri stops suddenly. I turn to look at him, wondering why his face looks so stormy. "It's Friday," he rumbles.

"So?"

His jaw is clenched tight. "Our arrangement still stands."

His eyes veer towards the basement door and I freeze. Hadn't we eaten together? Gone out together? Exchanged stories about past traumas and the loved ones we'd lost?

Was that all in my head? The way he's looking at me now says, *Did you really think you were any different than the women who came before you?*

"Will you at least tell me why?" I croak.

"No."

He seems to swallow up the entire night in that one small word. Everything I experienced tonight, everything I felt, is washed away like it meant nothing at all.

"Is it because you're entertaining another woman up here?"

His face doesn't shift at all. "It doesn't matter why. You'll go down to the basement because I told you to. You promised to behave. Now, fucking *behave*."

And just like that, with just a few words, he's reduced me down to a prisoner. He's put me back in my place and reminded me of the truth of our situation. I'm not his guest or his friend and I'm certainly not his girlfriend. He's not beholden to me for anything. He doesn't owe me any explanations.

He just says jump. I ask only how high.

I shove past him and descend into the basement. The moment I walk through that door, the darkness hits me and I feel a sob at the back of my throat.

What fresh hell is this? How am I back here after a week of freedom?

But I was never really free, now, was I? It was all just an illusion.

I got caught up in the moment, drawn to his confidence and his charisma. Wrapped up in the brother and the son that he was. Taken by how protective he seemed to be of the people closest to him.

And I was foolish enough to believe for a second there that *I* might be one of them.

Once the lock on the basement door turns, I slump over to the bed and lie down in it. Fetal position, of course, because it's just that kind of night.

I've been so swept away in the events of the last week—picnic lunches with Lev, long conversations with Uri, just the general ease of life above ground—that I completely pushed aside the stuff that matters to me.

Like Elle for instance. Her bridal shower. Her wedding. I was supposed to be there for all of it!

But instead, I'd dropped her a vague text message, per Uri's instructions, and then disappeared on her. She must think I'm

the worst fucking friend on the planet. And I wouldn't blame her.

Now, in addition to the heartbreak, I have guilt to contend with.

After an hour of tossing and turning, I end up in the shower, trying to scrub his scent from my skin. The whole time I'm getting pelted with cold water, I berate myself for being a naïve idiot. Then I get into my coziest pajamas and get into bed, resolving to be smarter than I have been.

And even so, my last thought before I drift off to sleep is, *Is he watching me?*



I'm *this* close to banging my head against a wall the next morning when the lock unbolts. I rush out of the kitchen to see Lev walking in, shuffling his feet uncertainly as his gaze veers around the room.

“Lev!” He jumps in place. “Oops, sorry. I didn't mean to frighten you.” He's wringing his hands and avoiding my eyes. I inch a little closer. “I'm sorry I've invaded your basement again.”

He nods like he's agreeing with me. “Can I stay here?”

“Of course. Make yourself comfortable.”

He just continues to stand there, swinging his hands. “Can we... do something together?”

As crappy as I'm feeling right now, those words warm me up. He didn't come here for the basement; he came here to see me.

“I thought you'd never ask.”

He blushes happily and, of course, his go-to is to the video game corner. I follow him there and we drop down in our usual spots. Lev on the carpet on the floor, and me on the sofa just behind him.

“My friend’s husband plays video games a lot, too,” I mention as Lev puts in his username. I’m pretty sure he’s not listening to me but I talk anyway. “I’ll bet he’s been roped into wedding planning now because I’ve gone MIA on...”

I trail as the screen catches my attention—and a conversation box pops up on the side. Lev minimizes it right away, but it’s got me thinking.

Elle used to complain about how Liam would stay up late chatting with all his gamer friends online. If Lev has a conversation box feature here, then that means he’s hooked up to the internet. Which means...

I have a lifeline to the outside world.

I slip down onto the carpet beside Lev. He stiffens, looking at me as though I might bite at any moment. I move a bit further away from him for comfort’s sake and give him a reassuring smile. “Do you have any online friends you talk to?” I ask, gesturing over to the conversation feature.

Lev shrugs.

“Could you show me how to use it?”

He nods and proceeds to tell me how it works in a rapid-fire monotone. My heart beats faster as he explains. It’s simple, straightforward, totally doable. This plan of mine might just hold water. I just have to wait until Lev goes back upstairs and hope to God that Uri isn’t paying that close attention to the cameras down here.

As long as I’m fully dressed, I figure I’ll be fine.

Now, all I have to do is get a message to Liam.

Help me get out of here.

ALYSSA

Saturday turns into Sunday.

Lev has been a no-show today, which means there's nothing to distract from my thoughts, which means they're furiously circling around Uri, because of course they are. It starts with rage and slides into longing that quickly turns back into rage.

Long story short, I'm a freaking mess.

And I have no idea what to do about it.

That's the thing: you can know something intellectually and you can feel something emotionally and, more often than not, those two things are in direct conflict with each other.

I know that Uri's bad for me. I know he's dangerous and selfish and he's probably using me for his own purposes. I shouldn't care what he does or how he lives as long as I can be free.

But I can't help but feel destroyed inside any time I so much as think of him upstairs with another woman.

Surely that has to be the reason I'm banished to the basement on weekends, right? I mean, why else would he want me out of sight, out of mind? He's trying to hide me from his legion of booty calls.

I'm not proud of that extremely petty thought. I'm not even mad at the faceless women he's probably devouring as I pace the basement in angry circles. I'm mad at him for being more than just a brutish thug. And I'm mad at myself for letting myself feel this way about him.

I'm getting worked up into one hell of a fervor when the basement door opens. I whip around wondering who I'm gonna have to deal with. I've already got settings geared up for each face.

Svetlana: polite reservedness.

Lev: maternal friendliness.

Uri: fire and brimstone and a pitchfork, if I can get my hands on one.

When I see who it is, I crank up the heat and bust out the sulfur and horns. Until I see the package in Uri's hands with a familiar logo on the front.

"Is that Kenny's Shakes and Bakes?"

He walks it over to the coffee table in the sitting area and sets it down. "You mentioned a few days ago that you love their lemon meringue pie and their opera cakes, so I got you a couple of each."

I squint at him, refusing to let go of my anger. "You're bribing me."

"No," he answers coolly. "I just thought you'd enjoy them."

"Right. Because you're just so thoughtful like that."

He tucks his hands into his pockets. "Why do I feel like I walked into a cage match?"

"Maybe because you've got me locked in a cage!" I snap. "I appreciate the sweets, but I'd rather be able to go upstairs."

Uri's face flatlines. "Not today. Tomorrow."

The curiosity is gnawing at me. No, scratch that—it's the insecurity that's gnawing at me. Maybe that's why I'm not willing to let him out of this basement until I get some answers.

"Your girlfriend doesn't know about the prisoner you're hiding down here, huh? Probably ruins the whole romantic vibe you're trying to concoct."

He narrows his eyes. “You’re looking for a fight, Alyssa, but I’m not biting.”

I grit my teeth. He’s right; I *am* looking for a fight. I’m looking for a reason to believe he still cares about me. Just one tiny hint. It’s pathetic but I can’t turn off my feelings and right now, they’re shouting a hell of a lot louder than my sense of reason.

“Just go. I’m done looking at your face.”

Uri’s eyes blaze and his eyebrows arrow downward. “That’s not how this works. *I* tell you what to do, *narushitel*. Not the other way around.”

I scoff. “What’s the problem? You should be chomping at the bit to go back upstairs to the latest whore you’ve got stashed up there.”

“You’re really in need of an endorphin rush today, aren’t you?”

“What I really need is my *freedom!*”

“Which you’ll lose the moment I let you out of my sight. Along with your life.”

“Right. Because there are big bad men who are out to get me? Please. Do you think I was born yesterday? There are no bad men. There’s just you and *you* want to keep me here.”

I’m starting to crack through his restraint. I can see that in the clench of his jaw and his white knuckles. “Why would I want to keep you here?”

I shrug aggressively. “To use me, to control me, to fuck me whenever the urge strikes. You get off on this, don’t you? You fucking love it.”

He walks towards me and my body erupts in tingles. Not the usual response when you’re smack dab in the middle of a fight. But nothing about this is “usual.”

“You have no idea the kind of world you’ve stumbled into.”

“Actually, I do. You’re all the same. You’re just the latest in a long line of powerful men with money to burn who think that

those things give you the right to do whatever the fuck you want to whoever the fuck you want. Guess what, Uri Bugrov? They *don't*." I step towards him, pushing myself into his space. "You don't get to use me and fuck me and then discard me when you decide you want to fuck some other sl—"

"*Blyat*', Alyssa!" he roars. "There's no other woman!" My mouth snaps shut as he glowers down at me. "I'm not entertaining anyone else up there. And since you seem so keyed up about it, I'm not fucking anyone else, either."

My heart is beating unevenly now. *Everything* feels uneven, actually. Maybe it was a mistake to get so close. Between his words and his scent, I'm feeling a little weak in the knees.

He grabs me by the back of the neck and hauls my face close to his.

I should be terrified.

I'm not.

"There's no one else?" I whisper tentatively.

His eyes flash. The next thing I know, he's kissing me so hard that I feel like my head's about to explode. When he finally breaks away, I'm in danger of tipping right over. Except he's still got my neck in the palm of his hand.

"It's just you and me, Alyssa. There's no one else."

Then he pushes me up against one of the basement walls and starts ripping at my pajamas. For the first time, I don't feel the cold in the basement. All I can feel is him—his warmth, his strength, his desire for me.

How did we end up here so fast?

The little nagging voice in the back of my head chimes in. *Because he told you exactly what you wanted to hear.*

But I'm not willing to question it now. I'm not willing to stop him, either. His lips come down over mine again and again. He takes the kiss as though it belongs to him. As though he has the inalienable right to.

It's a blur of kissing and touching and my clothes falling away. In the blink of an eye, I'm naked, with one leg hitched over Uri's thigh. I'm so wet that he slides in easily. There's precious little build-up—he just starts pumping hard, banging my body against the wall like he's trying to punish me one thrust at a time.

It takes only minutes before I'm succumbing to a drooling, sputtering orgasm. While his hands scour my body, leaving trails of bruising heat wherever they go, I try to get a hold of myself; I try to remember that this is temporary. Anything that burns this wildly was never meant to last.

We have an expiration date and it's coming sooner than I think.

Maybe that's why I surrender myself to the moment and stop questioning it.

Maybe that's why this feels like a goodbye.

Maybe that's why, as I come hard against the wall, I can't stop the tears from rolling down my cheeks.

URI

Nikolai's eyes zero in on me like a laser. "Anything you'd like to tell me?"

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. "You're always so relaxed after you come back from these business trips. You should really take them more often."

"I closed the deal on the Benioff merger and I got us three new investors. You're welcome."

He still has that calculated look in his eye, though. The one he gets when he has a shit ton to say but he wants me to show my hand first. Another thing he learned from our father.

"You have something to say, Nikolai. Just fucking say it."

He leans back in his seat. The way he's acting, you'd think *he* was the one in the boss's chair. "Heard you had quite the little outing just before the weekend."

This time, I can't hold back the eye roll. "Who snitched?"

Nikolai's back straightens. "Who didn't? *Everyone* is talking. You haven't been seen with her once; you've been seen with her *twice*. You promoted her from arm candy to girlfriend. You've made her important." His words are sinking in heavily and my chest churns. He has a point. "Whatever you've got going on with her, it needs to stop. Starting now."

I'm so pissed at myself that I have no room left to be pissed at Nikolai. He's not wrong.

"It's already over," I rumble.

“You’ve said that before.”

I slam my fist down on the table and Nikolai takes notice. His jaw clamps shut and his eyebrows pinch together. “I’ve ended it,” I reiterate. “There’s nothing more to discuss there.”

It isn’t a total lie. I *have* ended it; I just haven’t told her yet. Of course, there’s a chance Alyssa is already onto me. I pulled out of her yesterday only to find tears streaming down her cheeks. She tried to hide them and I pretended like I didn’t see them. But the sadness on her face was the final nail on our coffin.

We’ve been playing with fire all this time. Whatever we have was never made to last. And the sooner I end it, the better.

“Can I ask you something without you getting all defensive and snarky?”

I glare at my brother. “Of the two of us, you are the snarky one.”

He sighs and looks at me, so I wave wearily for him to continue. “What is it about her?” he asks.

I shift in my seat, doing my best to look detached and uncaring. “I don’t know.”

“Come on, brother.” He leans forward, elbows on his knees. “You’ve been with a lot of women. None of them have ever held your attention longer than a night. So what’s so special about this one?”

There are a hundred different answers I could give him. Since the moment I saw that hideous underwear ogling me while she dangled from my fence, I’ve been enamored. She snores when she’s exhausted. She wrinkles her nose when she’s trying to decide if I’m being earnest or sarcastic. She blinks twice before she sneezes and she chooses to believe the best in people even when the evidence suggests she shouldn’t. Any one of those would suffice.

Instead of saying any of that, though, I opt for the simplest and yet the heaviest explanation. “She’s good with Lev.”

Nikolai’s eyebrows hit the roof of his forehead. “No one is good with Lev.”

“Except for her.”

He leans towards me just a little. “And Lev?”

“I think Lev might have his first ever post-accident crush.”

Nik is quiet for several beats while he takes that in. “Is fucking her your twisted way of keeping her around for him?” he ventures.

I scowl. “She’s a good lay. Which is why I keep going back for more.” Those words should be easier to say than they are. As it is, it feels like spewing poison.

“Why do you think she’s so good with Lev?”

I’m on the verge of telling him about Ziva, but something stops me. It feels wrong to tell him anything that Alyssa shared with me in confidence. “How the fuck am I supposed to know that?” I scoff instead.

He raises up his arms in surrender. “Your preoccupation with her has been noted, Uri. That’s all I’m trying to stress to you.”

“Great. Your preoccupation with my preoccupation has been noted.”

“Don’t be an asshole. I’m doing this for the family. I don’t want Polly and Lev affected by your personal shit.”

I get to my feet. “I have no personal shit. I have this Bratva and this family—that’s it.”

“And if it came down to a choice?”

That takes me back. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“If you had to choose between her and us, what would you do?”

I glare at him furiously. “Is that an actual question or are you just trying to piss me off now?”

“Given how you’ve been behaving lately—”

“I would *never* pick anything or anyone else over this family. I swore to protect Lev and Polly and that is what I will do until the last breath leaves my body. You may doubt everything else I say and do, but never doubt that.”

Nikolai's eyes flash but in the end, he nods. "Alright, brother. Noted."

I stalk over to the window, wondering why he hasn't gotten the fuck out of my office yet. Surely he can see that I need some space.

"There is something else," comes his voice from behind me.

I close my eyes and sigh. *Of course there is.* "Tell me."

Nikolai pulls up the file he carried in here nearly an hour ago and slides it across the table towards me. "Igor's body showed up last night."

Fuck.

I don't hesitate to open the file. I'm expecting bad—but what I'm faced with is downright gory. It's fucking inhuman what Sobakin's animals did to Igor's body. I only hope that he died before the worst of it.

"A clean death was all that was necessary to get his point across," Nikolai says with an audible grimace. "They mutilated his corpse to send a message."

"Well, then we need to send them a message of our own."

Nikolai gets up and walks over to the locked drawer that holds reports that I haven't combed through in over a year. It's not because I'm uninterested—it's because I've memorized every single word on every single page.

"There are too many unanswered questions, Uri," he muses as he punches in the lock code, opens the drawer, and starts leafing through the folders. "We both know that. It's all right there in black and white."

"I haven't forgotten."

His lips tighten like he's trying to keep more words from spilling out. "No. Neither have I."

Our eyes meet and, in our shared anger and our shared grief, everything else is stripped away and I'm able to see my brother.

"His days are numbered. I promise you that."

Nikolai shakes his head. “I don’t want promises. I want action. I want fucking *revenge*.”

I haven’t opened the drawer in a long time. Seeing Igor’s body makes me realize that I need to dive in again. I need to remind myself of why I’m here and why I’m doing all of this.

Just like Nikolai...

I need revenge.

URI

“How was your day, Lev?”

It’s the third time Polina has asked and I have a feeling she won’t stop until she gets a response out of him.

“Lev, Polly asked you a question.”

He glances at me for only a second. “I want Alyssa.”

“Alyssa?” she asks immediately, her eyes glomming onto me. “Who’s that?”

“My friend,” Lev replies without missing a beat. *Sure, now, he decides to speak up.* “She’s my very pretty friend.”

Lev’s preoccupation with her might be getting a little out of hand. As soon as the thought comes, I snort. *I’m one to talk.* I’m in ten times deeper than he is.

“You made a new friend?” Polly asks as her tone brightens instantly. She waits until Lev’s head is buried in his cereal bowl again before she turns to me and lowers her voice. “Is that a real person?”

I shake my head. “He likes to play pretend sometimes. That’s all this is.”

“He’s never named an imaginary friend before. Especially not a ‘very pretty’ one.”

I shrug. “There’s a first time for everything.”

Thankfully, she lets the subject drop. The moment Lev finishes his bowl of cereal—for dinner, no less—he’s bouncing out of

his chair and gunning straight for the gaming room.

“I keep waiting to get used to that,” Polly says, so softly I almost miss it.

“To what?”

She shrugs. “To Lev. Being... different.”

I rack my brain for something to say, anything at all, but I come up blank. “How’s school?” I ask instead. Pol makes a retching sound. I raise my eyebrows. “Am I supposed to know what that means?”

“You know what Lev’s sounds mean.” My eyebrows rise a little higher. It’s been a while since Polly last sounded like a snotty teenager. “Shoot, sorry,” she says with a sigh. “That was bitchy.”

“It’s okay. Sounds like something’s going on. Wanna talk about it?”

“It’s nothing major. Just Rachel being Rachel.”

“I thought you were sticking to your side of school and she was sticking to hers?”

She smirks a little. “You *were* listening.”

“I do that from time to time.”

She nods. “I know. Nikolai doesn’t, though.”

Much as I want to kick his ass sometimes, I also feel the need to defend him. “He’s got a lot on his plate recently. I wouldn’t take it personally. What’s Rachel doing now?”

“You really want to know?”

“If it’s affecting you, I sure as fuck want to know.”

She suppresses a smile. “Honestly, it’s all mind games with her. She’s alienating Clare and me. She gets off on the power high.”

“Do you need me to come down and sort her out?”

“No!” My sister looks aghast. “That would just make everything worse.”

“How?”

“Uh—having my big brother come down to straighten out the queen bee? That would be *so* embarrassing.”

“If you change your mind, I’m right here.”

“I’ll remember that.” She looks at me from the corner of her eyes. “I know I wasn’t gonna come home next weekend, but I was thinking, I dunno... maybe I could.”

“You know you can come home whenever you want.” I pause, then ask, “Is there a reason you have in mind?”

She winces and hesitates.

“Polina.”

With a sigh, she lets loose her held breath and her chin falls to her chest. “There’s some stupid event at school that requires a parent to be present,” she explains “I just don’t feel like I want to be there for it.”

“I can be there,” I suggest. “Or Nikolai.”

“Neither one of you are my parents.”

“You realize I’ve changed your diapers, right?”

“Ew, stop.”

“Pol—”

“I just wanna come home, okay? You said I could come home whenever I wanted and I want to come home next weekend. That’s all.”

I nod and relent. “Whatever you want.”

But even as I say it, I know it’s not true. No one, no matter how powerful, can have whatever they want.

Even if it’s as simple as wanting your parents back.



I’m so engrossed in the photographs and reports in front of me that I don’t hear Nikolai walk in until his shadow falls across

the desk.

Seeing it all in black and white... it puts me right back in the moment. The horror of that day. Watching Nikolai get the call and freeze on the spot. He was catatonic for so long that I'd grabbed the phone and taken charge.

Sometimes, it still feels like he hasn't forgiven me for that.

"How long have you been looking through those?"

"Since Polly went off to bed a couple of hours ago."

I force my eyes away from pictures of the ravine where we found the car. It was one of Father's favorites. A vintage Ferrari 458. I've never been more aware that we're all just driving around in tin cans, one wrong twitch of the steering wheel away from fiery death.

"It's still all smoke and mirrors, man. Fucking nonsense. All we really have is the fact that one of Sobakin's men were on the train that derailed onto the road."

I pull out the photograph of the man in question. Ivan Federer. The crash had nearly ripped out his right arm. It wouldn't have mattered even if it had; he was one of the seventeen people who died that day.

"Isn't that enough?"

I pull out the technical report that we had to bribe the whole damn police department just to receive months after the derailment. The train in question had been tested mere weeks prior. Everything was in order. Nothing to suggest a critical malfunction was in its future.

Anger floods through me again. I haven't felt it this hot and urgent since their deaths. My arms flex and the veins on them pop.

"Channel that rage, little brother," Nikolai encourages, putting his hands on my desk and leaning towards me. "That's the only way to deal with it."

Our eyes meet and I can see the same anger in them that I feel. My knuckles are white and aching. Nikolai nods. "You've

always suppressed your anger. Pushed it aside, refused to feel it.”

“Of course I have,” I growl. “If I didn’t, I’d be totally useless.”

Nikolai shakes his head. “I’ve never stopped feeling it. It’s with me, day in and day out. I’ve learned to live with it.”

“I can’t afford to do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because I have Lev and Polly to think of,” I snarl. “Do you really think I could raise them if I’m so fucking angry all the time?”

Nikolai’s eyes fall flat. He turns away from me for a moment before whipping around again fast. “Sobakin is doing the same thing that he did back then. You know why he succeeded? Because he fought his battle from the shadows.”

“Like a coward.”

“He might be, but the bottom line is that he won. So what does it matter *how* he won?”

I scowl. “It matters to me.”

“It probably mattered to Otets, too. Now, he’s dead.”

I slam my fists against the table and launch up to my feet. “Don’t.”

Nikolai’s eyes burn with fury, but this time, that fury is directed at me. He straightens up, wobbles a few steps back, then takes a deep breath. “It’s your call.”

“That’s right. It’s my fucking call.”

Nikolai sighs and, just like that, he’s my brother again. “How’s Polina doing?”

“She’s fine. She’s a tough kid. But I think she misses us. She wants to spend more time at home.”

“With Sobakin running wild, that might not be the best idea.”

“I’m not gonna tell her she can’t come home, Niko.”

“That’s not what I meant and you know it.”

“Yeah.” I clear my throat. “I know.”

I wonder some days what the dynamic might be for us if we didn't jump down each other's throats every chance we got. What would be left if we didn't have this anger?

“I'm leaving.” Nikolai's eyes land on the files in front of me. “Get some sleep, will you?”

He turns and leaves without waiting for an answer I was never going to give. *Get some sleep?* We both know that's not happening.

URI

Sure enough, I don't take Nikolai's advice.

I stay up another hour, staring at the coroner's pictures of my parents' bodies after we found them in the ravine. I'm not sure why I sit there for so long. It's a form of self-punishment I thought I'd done away with years ago.

When I finally tuck everything back into the drawer, I know that I won't be able to sleep tonight. Tired as I am, my retinas are burning with the images. With the memories.

What I need now is a pain reliever. Something to take the edge off. I reach for the bar cart, but three vodkas later, I'm feeling more wired than ever. Adrenaline pumps through me, reminding me that I'm alive and they're not.

Fuck.

It's Pandora's box and the lid is cracked wide open. I can see all my sins circling the air around me, ready to lunge the moment I expose my neck. I pace the floor of my office. On each circuit, as I pass by my desk, I let my gaze linger on the dark screen of my monitor. It'd be easy to call up the camera feeds. Just to check in.

If vodka didn't fix me, maybe she can?

Fuck no.

But the thought is persistent. And the more time passes, the louder it becomes. *Just one little peek. One look and you can shut the thing right off.*

I know it's dangerous. I'm an addict and she's the drug I can't quit. It's just that nothing has ever felt as good as being inside her. I've never lost myself so completely as when I'm there, sharing breath, skin to skin, her eyes locked on mine and mine on hers. I have no idea why. And as pretty as she is, I can't credit those beautiful eyes or those rosebud lips.

It's everything else about her that draws me in. Her laugh when she sees something funny. Her smile when I deign to say something halfway decent to her. That soft melody of her voice when she's trying to calm Lev down.

Those are the things I think about when I crave her.

I end up in front of the monitor, my hands gripping the edges of the desk hard as they crackle to life. Despite how late it is, she's still up, lying in bed on her stomach with a book.

I don't even watch her that long before my will crumbles. With vodka still burning down my throat, I stalk to the basement like an animal ready to be uncaged.

Don't do it. Don't do it. Don't do it.

It's a steady refrain that keeps going—right up until I turn the lock on the door and push it open. She shoves herself upright, eyes wide and alarmed.

“Uri...?”

Just the sound of my name on her lips is balm for my soul. I shut the door and walk toward her, wondering how to even begin to explain my presence here.

Alyssa takes one look at my face and frowns. “Are you okay?”

Her eyes lower to my arms and that's when it hits me—my hands are curled into fists as though I'm ready for a fight. Little does she know, I already *am* fighting.

Fighting demons I can't reach.

Fighting a past I can't change.

She climbs out of bed slowly and my pulse quickens. She's not in her usual oversized pajamas. She's wearing a tiny pair of

light blue shorts and a tight tank top that makes it very obvious there's no bra beneath.

"Uri..." she murmurs again, taking a few tentative steps towards me.

Even as I chide myself for coming here in the first place, a part of me is aware of the fact that there was no stopping it. This shit was inevitable. As unstoppable as a runaway train.

She waits for me to say something, but when I offer her nothing, she keeps inching closer until she's standing right in front of me. She doesn't look angry or annoyed. She should, but she doesn't. The pinch of her eyebrows and the downward tilt of her mouth tells me she's concerned.

With her eyes fixed on my face, she reaches out and takes my hand. I flinch but she ignores me. Her fingers tighten around mine.

My God, does that feel good. Better than it ought to.

"Something's wrong." It's not a question.

Another step brings her close enough to feel every breath ghosting against my skin. Her chest rises and falls and her breasts brush against my torso. When she touches my forearm with her free hand, I flinch and grimace.

"I don't know how to fix you, Uri," she whispers tentatively. "I don't know how to fix what's broken in your life. But... maybe I can make you feel a little better. Just for now."

She pushes herself up on her tiptoes and grazes her lips against mine. It's the softest kiss I've ever had and it leaves me wanting more.

"That's why you came to me, isn't it?" she asks without a trace of accusation in her voice. "You wanted to feel better."

When I don't answer, she pulls me towards the bed and makes me sit down on the edge of it. She steps in between my legs, her hands falling against either side of my face. I look up at her, mesmerized by how fucking beautiful she is, how fucking ethereal she appears to be. She's not of this world. Not of *my* world.

But she's here.

Her heat is prickling at my skin, pushing its way through my body, forcing out the anger and the cold. My hands go to her hips like they have a mind of their own.

Those eyes of hers bore down onto my face. But she doesn't ask me anything else. She just lowers herself down to her knees in front of me and starts unzipping my pants. If I were more rational right now, I'd be asking myself how she knows exactly what I need. I'd be asking myself if this thing between us has gone so far now that it's crossed a line into something else entirely.

But then her hand cups my cock and I stop thinking entirely. Her mouth finds my hardness and my mind is wiped blank. The last vestiges of anger disappear altogether.

It's just me and Alyssa, floating around in a void of our own making.

She sucks on the head of my cock, letting rivulets of her spit run down my shaft before they coat my balls. She goes slow, massaging gently while she draws me deeper into her mouth. By the time my cock hits the back of her throat, my sense of restraint has disappeared with my anger.

I grab the sides of her head and start jerking my hips upwards, into her mouth. Her hands clamp down on my thighs, but she keeps her head steady.

With my jaw clenched tight, I fuck her mouth so hard that sweat starts beading up along my skin. Her strangled gasps only spur me on as I lose myself in her warmth and wetness.

It's never felt like this before. Not with anyone.

Finally, I can't hold back any longer. I erupt in her mouth, spurting cum down the back of her throat. Even after I've released her head, she doesn't pull out. She just keeps sucking while my body spirals out of control.

"Fuck," I growl as she continues to suck me long past the point of the orgasm. "*Fuck!*"

I collapse back against the bed, but it feels like she's attached to my cock. She keeps sucking on me. Hard. So hard that, within seconds, she's got me back to ready, on the precipice of coming all over again.

"Fuck... Alyssa..."

Her name escapes my lips and still, she doesn't stop sucking me off. The moment her fingers caress my balls, I explode inside her once more. She laps it up all over again like she didn't have enough the first time.

As my heartbeat slows, all I want to do now is close my eyes and sleep. A dreamless sleep, preferably. But the reason I force myself into an upright position again is because I want to sleep *here* with *her*.

She's still on her knees in front of me. *God, what I would give to kiss her right now.*

That's my second reason to leave. Actually, who am I kidding? I have thousands of those.

But I allow myself just one moment of weakness. I stroke her perfect, blush pink cheek with the back of my fingers.

Then I get the fuck up and I get the fuck out.

Because, despite what I know I want, I also know that I can't have it. We come from two infinitely different universes. We're two completely different people. We can't exist together in either sphere.

All we have are these stolen moments in the silence between our worlds.

I meet her eyes for a fleeting second. Then I rip myself away from her and practically run to the door. I don't turn back before I leave.

If I do...

I may not leave at all.

ALYSSA

The hot shower does a good job of wiping my body clean.

But as for my head? Yeah—not so much.

By the time I force myself out from under the rainfall showerhead, my fingers are badly pruned and I'm no closer to figuring out what to do than I was before.

One thing I can be sure of: Uri sought me out. He was going through something and he came to *me*. I may be struggling to control my feelings for him—but now, I'm sure that, in his own way, he's going through the exact same struggle.

We're like magnets with opposite poles. No matter how hard we try to fight it, we keep being pulled back together by forces beyond our control.

My core has been throbbing since he left. My jaw is a little sore and my tongue is still salty with his taste—but I don't regret any of it.

And that, in and of itself, freaks me out.

Shouldn't I regret it? Wouldn't a normal, self-respecting woman be appalled at the way Uri is treating me? Like I'm expendable to him? A sex toy that he can use and discard whenever he pleases?

He may very well be using me. Hell, he's practically said those exact words. But there are moments in between the wild sex and the passionate fighting when he does something that makes me think I'm more to him than just a convenient fuck.

Something as simple as a slice of cake or as intense as brushing my face with the softest of touches just a few minutes ago, right before he left. As insignificant as those gestures seem on the face of it... they feel important to me.

They *mean* something.

I can't bring myself to get back in bed. So instead, I pace. I meander back and forth between the bed and the gaming area again and again, carving foot trails in the carpet.

The longer I stay here, the harder it becomes to have perspective. The harder it becomes to extricate myself from the emotional cesspit I'm falling into. Every day, I get a little bit more attached to Lev. I fall a little bit harder for Uri. I convince myself that whatever the two of us have is normal.

It's not.

Fucking my face and then walking away is not *normal!*

Confining me to a basement during weekends for some unknown reason is not *normal!*

Seeking me out for sex whenever he's upset and then disappearing on me when I need him the most is definitely not fucking *normal!*

I just have to act while I still believe that. Before I'm in so deep that I just accept that this is my new life and Uri gets to dictate how it goes.

Buoyed by my newfound determination, I rush to the gaming area and turn on the screen on the off chance that Liam has seen my friend request and accepted me. I'm not really expecting it to work out. The wedding's right around the corner. Pretty sure the groom won't have time to—

Friend request accepted.

I want to cry. Today, I'm extremely grateful for Liam's obsessive love for all things video games. If I ever get out of this basement, I'm gonna buy him a new Xbox with all the trimmings.

I gasp when I see Liam's little avatar icon turn green. He's online! I grab the remote control and start typing fast into our

private conversation box.

ALYSSA: *Liam. It's Alyssa. I know it's late but if you're there can you get Elle on here pronto? It's urgent.*

LIAM: *Hold up. I'll get her.*

I'm freaking out. My heart is pumping fast, my legs feel like jelly and I'm almost positive I'm *thiis* close to peeing my pants.

I jump again when I see the three little dots appear on the screen that means someone—hopefully Elle—is typing.

LIAM: *Alyssa! What. The. Fuck??? Where the hell are you?*

ALYSSA: *First off, I'm so fucking sorry I missed your bridal shower.*

LIAM: *You think I care about that shit? Where the hell are you? Should I be calling the police? Just give me the word and I'm dialing 911 right fucking now.*

ALYSSA: *No. Don't. I'm fine. I'm safe.*

Am I fine? Am I safe? I have no idea why I'm lying to my best friend but my gut is telling me that I'm not lying for her or for myself.

ALYSSA: *I'm on a job.*

LIAM: *Right. Cuba. I got your lame text message, Lys. It didn't exactly explain anything. Do you know how many messages I've sent you in the last two weeks?*

ALYSSA: *A lot?*

LIAM: *A fucking TON. Why haven't you been answering? And why the hell are we texting on this lame ass thread instead of on our phones like normal people?*

ALYSSA: *All great questions. And I'm gonna try and answer them. Just... bear with me okay? It's complicated.*

LIAM: *Okay. Fine. Tell me everything.*

Everything. That's a tall ask. And considering I set this unlikely plan in motion days ago, I'm shocked that I'm not

better prepared with my answers. The fact is, as much as I want to get out of this basement, I'm not willing to throw Uri under the bus to do it.

Idiot.

ALYSSA: *I sorta... met someone.*

LIAM: *Wait. This is about a GUY?*

ALYSSA: *Sorta. I was working on a story and I kinda accidentally got caught up in a... situation.*

LIAM: *In Cuba?*

Biting my lip, I wonder if I should just come clean. But that feels a little too complicated right now. Let's unravel one lie at a time.

ALYSSA: *Yes. Anyway, like I said, I'm okay. I was saved by this guy.*

LIAM: *Oh boy. Is that where you are?*

ALYSSA: *Yes. I've been staying with him the last few weeks.*

LIAM: *And why haven't you been responding to any of my messages or calls. Do not tell me that Cuba has bad reception because I freaking googled it.*

ALYSSA: *I lost my phone in the midst of everything and I've been lying low.*

LIAM: *So you are in danger???*

ALYSSA: *The guy I'm with, he's powerful here. He's keeping me safe.*

That part doesn't feel like a lie. Uri's ego problems might be infectious.

LIAM: *Lys, I'm not gonna lie. I'm worried.*

ALYSSA: *Don't be. As soon as the situation is dealt with, I'm coming home. I just wanted you to know that I'm fine. And I wanted to say how sorry I am for missing your bridal shower.*

LIAM: *Hon, something's not adding up for me. Why didn't you just call? Surely your knight in shining armor has a*

phone you could have borrowed.

The whole point of trying to contact Elle was to try and get myself out of this situation. But somewhere between Uri leaving and texting Elle, I've made a sharp turn.

What the hell are you doing?

And then it strikes me. The *real* reason I wanted to contact Elle. It wasn't to get me out of this situation; it was so that I could get some much-needed perspective on how to navigate it. Because no matter how complicated things are right now, I trust that Uri won't hurt me.

ALYSSA: *It's complicated and I swear, one day I'll explain it all to you. But for right now, I need your advice.*

LIAM: *I'm here. Hit me with it.*

ALYSSA: *The guy I'm with—he saved me from this situation and gave me refuge in his home. And then one thing led to another...*

LIAM: *This might be entirely inappropriate given the situation but FINALLY!*

ALYSSA: *Excuse me?*

LIAM: *Come on, hon. Dont make me say all the stuff about how its about time u finally got laid...*

ALYSSA: *May I continue please!!*

LIAM: *SMH. I would have thought getting some strange would have relaxed you. Apparently not. go on.*

ALYSSA: *there was a small, naive part of me that thought that it might be getting serious between us. But he's hard to read. i never know where i stand with him.*

LIAM: *That doesn't sound good.*

ALYSSA: *That's just it. I've spent weeks w/ him now and I really believe he's a good man. It's just he's been through a lot, you know. And he does take care of me. He makes me feel seen & heard. I can't remember ever feeling that way w/ another guy.*

LIAM: *ok, but clearly there's a question there otherwise you wouldn't be contacting me in this very weird way.*

ALYSSA: *he can be... closed off sometimes. Actually a lot of the time.*

LIAM: *are you still having sex with him even when he's closed off?*

ALYSSA: *i mean...*

LIAM: *Girl! I don't care how hot he is or how good he is to you. Sometimes is not enough. You deserve a guy who's good to you ALL the fucking time.*

LIAM: *Either way, what are you gonna do? Move to fucking Cuba? come on Lys. Be real.*

She has a point there. I mean, I'm not really in Cuba. But let's face it: staying in Uri's world is as good as that.

ALYSSA: *you're right.*

LIAM: *duh. But I also know what it's like to be in the throes of something new and exciting. And if anyone deserves a torrid, whirlwind romance, it's you!*

LIAM: *Which is why I will forgive you for missing my bridal shower.*

ALYSSA: *Bless you.*

LIAM: *BUT—I need you at my wedding, Alyssa. I can't get married without my maid of honor.*

I feel horrible, especially because I'm pretty sure the next words I type are gonna be a lie. But I type them anyway.

ALYSSA: *Wouldn't dream of it.*

LIAM: *Don't fall off the face of the planet again, k? I get worried when I don't hear from you.*

ALYSSA: *ill message again soon. Thanks Elle.*

LIAM: *And remember—you deserve a real, full, loving relationship. Anything less and you need to walk away. No matter how hot the guy. No matter how great the sex.*

ALYSSA: *ill keep that in mind. Love you.*

LIAM: *Love you too. Xoxoxo.*

It's good advice. Great advice, in fact.

I just hope I'm strong enough to take it.

URI

“I can drive you myself.”

Polly smiles. “So you keep saying. But it’s a two-hour drive there and a two-hour drive back. You’ve got more important things to do.”

I narrow my eyes. “There is nothing more important than you.”

“What about Lev?” It might almost be misconstrued as a snotty question if she didn’t sound so sincere. She seems to realize that a moment later, because she rushes to explain herself. “What I mean is, Lev needs you more than I do. I’m not resentful or anything. It’s just a matter of fact.”

She’s right—but I still hate that she’s had to sacrifice so much to accommodate him. “Polly, you’re just as important to me as Lev is.”

“That is so not what I meant.”

“I know that,” I say quickly, putting my hand on her shoulder. “Don’t worry.”

She takes a little breath but I’m not sure it steadies her the way she was hoping. “I really don’t resent Lev, you know,” she mumbles.

I meet her eyes. “It’s okay if you did, though.” She opens her mouth to say something but I keep going. “And that doesn’t mean you don’t love him. It just means you’re fourteen and you’re human and you’re allowed to want things to be about you from time to time. That’s permitted, Pol.”

She looks at me uncertainly for a moment. Then she exhales noisily. “Thanks for that.”

I smile. “Have I told you lately that you’re an amazing sister?”

She blushes. “I don’t really do anything.”

“No, you don’t. You don’t complain. You don’t create trouble for me. You don’t argue and you don’t make everything about you.”

Her smile gets a little wider as I pull her into my arms and kiss the top of her head. She’s thin and gangly but I can see in her face the outlines of the woman she’s well on her way to becoming.

“You’re a great big brother, ya know?”

“Oh, I know.”

She laughs and mock-punches me in the chest. I walk her to the door where her bag is being loaded into the back of the bulletproof SUV that’s designated exclusively for her use.

“Why isn’t Lev allowed down to the basements during weekends?” Polly asks abruptly. She raises one eyebrow. “Or is it just the weekends I’m here? He told me about it. He wasn’t happy.”

Fucking hell. Just when I choose to place my bets that Lev doesn’t open up about much, he goes and proves me wrong in the most inconvenient way possible. “It’s not every weekend. It’s just on days when he gets really anxious.”

“I would have thought being out of the basement would make him more anxious, not less.”

The girl is too smart by half. I’m going to have to think of another plan soon. Summer is just around the corner and that means Polly’s going to be here for months. There’s no way I’ll be able to keep Alyssa from her for that long unless I make alternate arrangements for my problematic little prisoner.

“He’s been having nightmares lately. It helps to have him sleep close to me just in case he needs me in the night.”

“Oh.” Her face drops. “What kind of nightmares?”

I feel like an asshole for lying to her about this. But it's a necessary evil, a sin that I have to commit in order to protect her from... all the rest of it.

"Nightmares about the accident, as far as I can tell. He doesn't like to talk about it."

"Oh, God, they're back, huh?" she asks, chewing on her bottom lip.

"Don't worry about this. I've got it handled."

She sighs and crosses her hands over her chest. She looks so much like Mom when she does that. "Of course I'm gonna worry, Uri. He's my brother. And so are you."

"Me? Why the hell are you wasting time worrying about me?"

She raises her eyebrows. "Because you can't be everything for everyone all the time. You need something of your own. Something that feeds your soul."

"I feed my soul plenty."

"I'm not talking about the parade of women you bring through here."

"Excuse me?"

She gives me a withering scowl. "I'm fourteen. I'm not stupid."

"There's no way you know about that unless—"

"People talk, big brother."

"I'm gonna have to have a chat with the staff."

She punches me again. "Aw, come on. Don't be a killjoy. Gossip is the one thing they have. Hell, it's the one thing *I* have. How else am I supposed to get the tea about what goes on here while I'm away?"

She wags her eyebrows at me and I shake my head, trying to control my expression. But all I'm thinking is, *How much does she actually know?*

"What else are they filling your head with?"

Polly laughs. “That the parade of women you bring through here has come to a grinding halt recently.”

“I’ve been too busy to focus on my personal life.”

“Oh, sure, your ‘personal life.’” She snorts and folds her arms over her chest. “Come on—you don’t have a personal life. What you have is a *sex* life. There’s a difference.”

I shake my head at her. “When did you get to be so grown up?”

Polina grins from ear to ear. “I’m looking forward to summer. And I’m really looking forward to spending more time with Lev. He seems to be doing... better.” She says it tentatively, like she’s afraid to hope too hard. “Well, better in some ways. Like...” She glances back over her shoulder into the house as though she’s worried he might be skulking around, listening in on us. “Yeah, just more open to suggestions. He even let me play a couple of video games with him. And I was able to take him outside a couple of times! Can you believe it?”

“He’s been making strides lately.”

“I wonder why?” she muses thoughtfully.

Alyssa, comes the obvious answer in my head. Out loud, I say, “George is pushing his limits a little.”

Polly frowns. “I spoke to George. He’s not doing anything new.”

Yeah, I’m definitely gonna have to come up with an alternate plan. Polly is too damn perceptive for her own good. She also happens to be interested, which is very inconvenient. For once, I wish she was less aware and more self-involved with typical teenage girl bullshit.

“Let’s not question a good thing,” I say diplomatically.

She nods. “You’re right. I’ll see you soon, Uri. Thanks for taking care of me this weekend.”

She drops a kiss on my cheek and saunters towards the SUV. I wave her off and duck back inside, making a beeline to my office.

I had hoped to sort out the situation with Sobakin faster but it's turning out to be trickier than I anticipated. For one, the bastard is reclusive. For another, the long game generally requires time. Which means Alyssa is gonna be here for at least part of the summer.

I glance out my office window and spot the very corner of the pool house. That would be an option. Pol wouldn't mind her own space when she's here—but I don't like the idea of having her so far from the main building.

Maybe I could move Alyssa there? But I'm hit with the same roadblock—too damn far for my liking.

Gritting my teeth, I reach out instinctively and flip on the cameras that connect to the basement. It's become such a habit now to watch her that I don't even realize I'm doing it until after I'm already engrossed.

She's lying in bed with a book. My pulse quickens and my cock twitches to life instantly. She's wearing a thin silver slip that barely reaches her knees, but she's stroking her right leg absentmindedly which means the silky fabric has ridden up high enough that I can see that creamy thigh of hers.

Goddammit.

It makes me wonder what I'm going to do when she's no longer in my home and on my property. How am I going to deal with never seeing her again, never touching her again?

Polly's words float back to me unbidden. *You need something of your own. Something that feeds your soul.*

What if Alyssa is what I need?

With my eyes fixated on her, I start touching myself, imagining how incredible it would feel to storm in that basement right now, throw that book to the side so I can thrust inside her. Fuck her until her breasts bounce right out of that silver slip she's wearing.

Every time I see her, I feel the need to unleash some deep-held part of myself. I want to mark her with my teeth, my cock, my gaze, until she can't even think of moving on. Until she's as convinced of the fact that she's mine as I seem to be.

Blyat'.

She turns onto her stomach and I'm offered a perfect view of her ass. Her slip slides up just enough that I can see the juicy curves of her cheeks. From this vantage point, it doesn't look like she's wearing underwear.

I start pumping my cock harder, all the time, resisting the urge to just go down there and get the real thing. My hand is nowhere near as soft, wet, or tight as she is. I'm missing her warmth, her scent, her soft skin sliding over my own.

Somewhere in the midst of my frantic jerking, I let myself consider the possibility of having her stay for good. The only question is... would she want to?

She turns a page and her slip rides up even higher. She has the most beautiful ass I've ever seen. It's just begging to be ridden, slapped, kissed, and licked. I can imagine how she'd moan if I pushed inside her. Those lips parting to let loose the softest, meekest mewl that's ever been—

Fuuuck.

I come in my hand, my heart galloping hard inside my chest. The moment I wipe away the cum, the cold reality of my fantasies hit me.

Of course she can't stay.

Of course I can't fucking keep her.

It's ridiculous to even go there. I need to get a grip and focus on what's really important. My Bratva. My family. My responsibilities.

But even as I shut down the camera feed, I can't help thinking that Polina might just be onto something. If I'm going to be everything for everyone all the time, I need something to feed my soul.

And she just might be it.

ALYSSA

I never thought I'd look forward to a Monday morning so much.

Yet here I am, waiting by the door for the inevitable bolt that will release me from my dark prison. I keep checking the clock on the wall. He's late today.

It's half past eight now and there's still no sign of anyone. I don't even hear footsteps when I press my ear to the door.

He's just caught up with something. He'll be here. He'll let me out.

But when ten o'clock rolls around, my hope starts to dwindle. Where is Uri? Or Svetlana? Or Lev?

I end up banging my fists against the door and yelling to no one in particular, "Hey! Can anyone hear me? Let me outta here!"

Nothing.

I eat a bowl of cereal for breakfast and snack on some fruit until around midday. I'm in the bathroom when I hear the bolt being released.

Fucking finally.

I'm so relieved I could cry. But when I wash up and get out there, there's no one around. *What the hell?* And then I see the tray sitting just in front of the door. It's a full tray of lunch... and the door is still locked.

Which means I'm not getting out of this basement today.

“No,” I breathe in a panic. “No, no, no...”

I jump over the tray and try to yank the door open. It doesn't budge an inch. A desperate sob escapes me and I slide to the floor as my tears come loose.

Why isn't he letting me out? The weekend is over. This was never part of the deal. Did it have something to do with the last time he came in here?

He was clearly upset, looking for something. I didn't push him for answers or explanations, though; I just got down on my knees and gave him what I thought he needed. Did I completely misread the situation? Had I gotten too close and he's pulling the classic fuckboy maneuver of keeping his distance now?

I'm still shaking even after I stop crying. The disappointment is so deep that it takes a while before I can even stand. I ignore the tray of food and start pacing the basement, looking for something, anything, that might give me some direction and help me to re-focus.

My eyes pass over the gaming console but I don't want to have to deal with another drawn-out typing conversation with Elle. I need to be able to hear her voice. Which is how I end up rifling through Lev's gaming boxes, hoping to find a pair of headphones I can use.

I hit the jackpot in the third drawer. The headphones look like they've been through the wringer but I'm hoping to God they work for me now. I switch the screen on and type in my username and password.

I've got one message from Elle.

LIAM: *hi hon. Just checking in to see how ur doing. If you ever need to talk again, don't hesitate, k? im gonna make sure I check this thing regularly. Liam's getting excited, he thinks im getting into gaming. Ha! He wishes.*

I look for a little icon that would allow me to call Elle. It's midday on a Monday morning but she is taking a few weeks off before the wedding so I'm hoping she'll be at home.

“Ah, there it is!” I gasp, spotting the ***Call Player*** button.

I slip on the headphones and press call. It starts ringing immediately and I wait with bated breath, hoping against hope that she picks up.

“Please, please, please—”

“Alyssa?!”

“Oh, thank God, Elle! You picked up!”

“Sorry it took me so long. I didn’t realize my TV was the one that was ringing. Oh my God, it’s *so* good to hear your voice.”

“Elle, you have no idea. I’m so happy I might just cry.”

“Are you crying? Because you sound a little snotty.”

I sniff. “Umm... would you believe me if I said no?”

“You are. Lys, is that sad crying or happy crying?”

I’m not quite sure how to answer. “It’s both.”

“Okay, let’s get real. Tell me what’s going on. And who is this guy you’re shacking up with? He’s not some, like, Cuban drug lord, is he? Because I’m gonna find it really hard not to freak out if he is.”

“He’s not a Cuban drug lord. In fact... he’s not Cuban at all.”

There’s a beat of silence. I know I’m taking a risk here but I can’t help it. It’s one thing to lie over text message. It’s a whole other thing to lie over the phone. That voice-to-voice contact makes the lie feel so much worse.

“He’s not Cuban?”

“He’s Russian.”

“You met a Russian in Cuba?”

I sigh. “I’m not in Cuba at all, Elle. I never left the States.”

She gasps. “You *lied* to me?”

“I didn’t want you getting involved. I did something stupid and I got mixed up with the wrong people.”

“Does that include this Russian dude?”

“Yes. No. I’m not sure.”

“Because you’re sleeping with him?”

Yes. No. I’m not sure.

“I don’t really know, Elle. It does feel like he’s just trying to protect me. That’s what he says, anyway.”

“How? By keeping you locked away? By stopping you from contacting your friends and family? By controlling your every move? Alyssa, this is serious. I’m gonna call the cops.”

“No!” I shout. My reaction is so immediate and so adamant that it shocks even me. “I’m sorry—I didn’t mean to yell. It’s just... you can’t call the cops.”

“Why the hell not? You’re clearly a prisoner. Am I right?”

“No, it’s not like that.” I have no idea why I’m lying to her. Didn’t I just call her in a panic because I felt stuck down here? “It’s way more complicated. He’s not a bad guy; he just knows the situation better than either you or I do and—”

“What ‘situation,’ Alyssa?” Elle demands. “What the fuck is going on and how are you in the middle of it? I don’t understand—”

“Elle, stop and listen to me for a second.” She pauses, breathing frantically, as I explain. “I saw something... um, that is to say, I picked something up that I shouldn’t have. I was confused and I made a mistake. And that mistake put me directly in the path of my neighbor. Who is... well, you know the rumors. They’re mostly true.”

“For fuck’s sake, Alyssa,” Elle hisses in a tense whisper. “You’re wrapped up in some hardcore mafia shit.”

“Bratva,” I correct automatically. “And yes.”

“And this guy... he’s protecting you from it?”

“Yes. I really shouldn’t get into the how and why now, Elle. I shouldn’t even be talking to you. I just really needed someone to talk to.”

I’m fingering my charm bracelet, trying not to word vomit all over my best friend. But after days of isolation, it’s hard not to let it rip.

“Okay, hon. I can’t believe I’m letting you get off that easily, but okay. You know I’m here for you, right?”

“I know.”

“And you’re safe? As in, you *feel* safe? He’s not... hurting you or anything, right?”

I blink away my tears. “He makes sure I’m comfortable. And his place is huge. It’s definitely not a prison, even if it feels that way sometimes. I’m just... going a little stir-crazy, is all.”

“Of course you are. You’ve never been able to stay in one place since Ziva died.”

I stop short, feeling like she just flayed me open in one sentence. “I—that’s not true.”

Elle gives me a wry chuckle. “Oh, hon, who are you kidding? You’ve been running from the moment we buried her. You’ve never stopped.”

Is that why I hate this basement so much? Is that why I’m fighting so hard not to be alone?

“I get it, you know,” Elle says gently. “She wasn’t just your sister; she was your twin. I can’t imagine a bond any closer.”

Tears prick at my eyes, but the more I try to ignore them, the harder they become to avoid. “Elle.” My voice sounds shaky even to my own ears.

“Yes?”

“There are moments when it feels...” I clear my throat self-consciously. “It’s like the bond I felt with Ziva is similar—very similar—to the one I sometimes feel with... *him*.”

“Are you fucking with me?”

“I wish I were.”

“Jesus.”

“I know.”

“Hey now, that’s not a bad thing, right? I mean, apart from the fact that he might possibly have ties with the Russian mafia and is probably involved in a whole shadow war with a rival

mob... er, bratty-whatever-gang who drive around in unmarked vans killing people off willy-nilly.”

I exhale. “That was a very succinct and eloquent summation.”

“I’m a wordsmith, what can I say?”

Despite how shitty I feel right now, how desperate and alone, a laugh bursts from my lips. It makes a world of difference.

“Thanks for talking to me, Elle.”

“Anytime. And if you get to the point where you need help and you decide that you’ve had enough—call me. I’ll bring in the cavalry.”

With that promise secured, I hang up and stash the headphones away. It’s nice knowing that I have an out if I need it. What’s not so nice is knowing that, in spite of everything, I still feel the need to protect Uri. I still feel the need to protect his family.

Lev doesn’t deserve to have the property swarmed with cops and reporters. That would just push his progress back by years and I refuse to be responsible for that. So that’s not an option.

But I’m also not willing to be ignored anymore. Uri can’t just waltz in here whenever he needs me, just to walk back out again when he’s done using me. He doesn’t get to pull all the strings anymore—because *I’m* taking control.

I move around the basement until I find tape, paper, and scissors. Then I comb through the space until I pinpoint every single camera that he’s used to spy on me all this time.

It takes me the better part of the day, but by the time I’m done, every lens is covered over.

Take that, Uri Bugrov. Try spying on me now.

URI

The plan is simple: gather final evidence that Sobakin was the one behind my parents' deaths. Infiltrate his ranks. Bring him the fuck down.

The plan has the added bonus of keeping me so busy I haven't had time to check on Alyssa. I'm doing my best to ignore the way she keeps popping into my head every now and again. Let's just call that a glitch in the system. It'll work itself out soon.

The moment Sobakin is dealt with, that takes care of my Alyssa problem. She'll be gone. A memory, nothing more.

"Lunch?" Nikolai asks, looking up from his phone.

"Not hungry."

He frowns. "You're never hungry these days. What's with that?"

I shake my head. "I've got too much going on."

"To *eat*?" Nikolai asks. "Come on, I thought we could go out for lunch with Polly and Lev. There's a new restaurant downtown I've been wanting to try."

I raise my eyebrows. "You say shit like that and it reminds me of the fact that you barely spend any real time with Lev."

I don't mean for it to come out as harsh as it does, but Nikolai flinches back. "Fuck you. I spend time with Lev."

"When was the last time you kicked a ball around with him? Or played video games with him? Or joined us for dinner at

home?”

“I’ve been busy running *your* Bratva.”

I roll my eyes. “It’s a nice idea, but Lev can’t sit in a restaurant and eat. He hates the sound of cutlery on plates.”

“Since when?”

I shrug. “It’s a new thing. We’re working on it.”

“I saw him eating last night. You guys were all using cutlery.”

“It’s fine with just a few people. Not when there’s a ton. The sound triggers him.”

“Jesus Christ,” he spits. “Sometimes, it feels like he’s getting worse, not better.”

“He’s never going to get better, Niko. You know that already. He’s always going to be just a little bit—”

“Fucked up?”

I glare at him. “Different.”

He sighs. “I shouldn’t have said that. I’m sorry.” He looks at me from the corner of his eyes. “Speaking of fucked up, though, what’s up with you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that you’ve been really tightly wound the last couple of days. Is there something going on that I should know about?”

I look back over the last couple of days, trying to figure out what he might have noticed. Maybe I’d been a little more aggressive than necessary but we were planning an attack on Sobakin. What the hell did he want from me, though? This is the man who killed our parents, after all.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about. I’m just focused on getting that motherfucker.” Nikolai frowns, so I add, “Polly’s back at the end of the week for summer. I just have a lot to manage, that’s all.”

Nikolai’s lips purse up but he doesn’t say anything. Instead, he nods and gets to his feet. “I’m gonna go get something to eat.”

I'll see you tonight for the briefing."

I wave him out with relief. Lately, it feels like everyone is on my fucking case. I have a Bratva to run, an enemy to take on, a family to protect, and a woman brooding restlessly in my basement. Of course I'm tightly wound.

My eyes veer to the screen that I haven't turned on in two days. My hands ball into fists and my knuckles go white.

I've approached this like an addict trying to get clean. I went cold turkey and stopped looking at the camera, stopped going down to see her. As long as I kept working, that plan was successful. But now, I'm alone, with nothing but my thoughts and my rising blood pressure.

What is she doing right now? Is she pissed? Sad? Frustrated?

There's nothing like seeing Alyssa all riled up. All that self-consciousness falls by the wayside when something really gets her going.

I walk over to the bar and pour myself a shot. It doesn't help, so I take another. That doesn't help, either. What are my other options?

Take a cold shower? Done that.

Hit the gym? Done that, too.

Fuck another woman? I consider that for all of five seconds before my body physically rejects the idea. Quite literally, my erection deflates instantly. But by the time I walk over to the desk and sit down, it's perking up again simply from the anticipation of seeing Alyssa.

I might need rehab at this point.

The feed starts up but all I can see is black. What the fuck...? For a moment, I wonder if we've been hacked. But when I check the cameras around the rest of the house, everything seems to be working fine. I switch perspective between cameras and I realize that the feed is fine.

We haven't been hacked into.

Alyssa has found the cameras.

Furious, I'm out of my seat and storming towards the basement, ready to tear her a new one. I'm vaguely aware that I'm a little too happy to have a legitimate reason to go down there. I shove open the door—well, I try to. Oddly, I'm met with resistance.

“Alyssa!” I roar through the two-inch gap.

I push a little harder and I hear the scrape of something heavy on the other side. Has she tried to block it?

Her voice comes from beyond the scraping sound. She sounds relatively calm on the surface, but there's an edge. “I'd like some privacy, thanks.”

Oh, hell no.

I push my entire weight against the door and it shoves open, upending the armchair that she wedged in place. I suppose she has had a lot of free time down here. Of course, I'm not about to feel sorry for her. I'm here to teach her a goddamn less—

I freeze.

Fuck me.

She's lying on the bed, bare naked, her hair feathered out over the pristine white sheets. Her head is resting against a raised pillow while her right hand disappears between her legs.

“What are you doing?”

She turns to the side and raises her eyebrows. But she doesn't stop touching herself; she doesn't even make an attempt to cover herself up.

“I would have thought it was obvious.” She arches her back and pushes her nipples out. Then she lets out a long, drawn-out moan.

I flinch as though the sound is physically painful. “Stop.”

She doesn't even look my way. She spreads her legs out a little wider, offering me a perfect view of her dripping wet pussy and just keeps rubbing her folds. “This isn't a good time, Uri.”

“Alyssa,” I growl, “I'm serious.”

She lets out a delighted little chuckle. “Oh, I bet you are. Always so serious, huh, Uri? The big bad *pakhan* with the whole world on his shoulders. You just need to relax. Like I’m doing right now.”

Her tits look so good. My mouth fills with saliva and my cock is straining hard against my pants.

“Alyssa…”

But my tone isn’t nearly as commanding as I need it to be. How the hell am I supposed to concentrate on laying down the law, when all I want to do is lay… well, *her*.

“Yes, boss?” she gasps. “What do you want from me?” Her gaze slides dreamily to me. “I’m yours to command, aren’t I? Yours to use.”

Stop it, I scold myself. You’re *the one who’s in charge*.

“What is the point of this little show?” I manage to snarl.

She bites on her bottom lip and starts rubbing herself a little faster, just a little bit harder. The sheen of sweat on her body makes me want to do terrible things to her.

“Why did you put paper over the cameras?” I demand, trying to pretend as though she’s not writhing around naked on her bed.

“Mmm… I wanted privacy. You can imagine why.”

Goddammit. My cock throbs. “That’s a safety concern.”

“*You’re* a safety concern.” Her fingers keep stroking. “Why didn’t you let me out on Monday?”

“I was busy.” My voice comes out hoarse and strained. “You seem to be doing just fine on your own.”

She rolls over and gets on her knees. Her fingers are still rubbing her clit as she turns to face me. “A girl’s gotta find ways to entertain herself.”

My jaw clenches and my eyes narrow. “Stop it now, Alyssa.”

She bites her bottom lip and her eyes narrow to match mine. “I’m not stopping until I come.”

“You don’t get to come until *I* say you can.”

Her response is to moan even louder. My cock is ready to burst and my willpower is hanging by a thread.

She shakes her head. “Oh, no—you’re not the boss of me.”

Those fire-and-brimstone eyes are wreaking havoc on my body. On my fucking soul. She’s what I’ve been missing the last few days. She’s the reason my stomach has been twisted in knots, my fists clenched tight.

She’s the problem.

She’s also the solution.

I stride forward, grab her by the hips, and shove her down on the bed. “Wanna bet?”

URI

I'm not the boss of her?

I'm not the boss of her?

Oh, I'm going to show this sexy little minx *exactly* who's boss. Exactly who's in control. Her tight little body writhes as I unzip and pull my cock out. I don't even bother to pull my pants all the way down before I shove myself inside her.

She lets out a frantic half-moan, half-wail as I go in deep.

"See?" I growl. "See who you belong to?"

Her head lolls from side to side, sending her hair flying across her face. I grab her by the chin and force her to look at me. "Your body is mine, little *kiska*. Your pussy is mine. That tight, wet cunt of yours... *fuck*... it's all mine. Which means your orgasms belong to *me*."

She doesn't hold back any more than I am. She jerks her hips forward, inviting in the orgasm, pushing me to the brink before I'm ready.

"Remember who you belong to," I snarl as I fuck her faster and faster.

Her eyes zone in on me, bright and sharp and full of fire. "You've got it backwards. This is *my* body. *My* pussy. *My* orgasms."

She pushes herself up and grabs my neck. We roll over until she's on top. Then she starts riding me hard, like a woman

possessed. She's off-the-charts wild as she fucks me, her ass bouncing on my cock relentlessly.

"Yes, baby," I grunt. "Ride me... *fuck*..."

My hands rake down her sides, taking her all in. She's fucking magnificent and there's no way I'll be able to hold on much longer. I can feel it coming like thunder in the distance.

"Fuck, baby..."

She leans in, pushing her breasts into my face, then slides her tongue over my bottom lip before moving it to my ear. "You like my pussy, baby? You like how wet it is for you?"

"Yes... fucking hell, yes."

She bites on my earlobe, unleashing a twinge of pain that only brings me that much closer to losing my mind. "You wanna control me, baby?" she moans, really grinding on my cock now.

I nod fiercely, seconds away from coming.

And then—

Her eyes make contact with mine. They burn and crackle as though I've just thrown lighter fluid on them. "Well, too fucking bad. You don't get to." Her voice cracks like a whip and the next thing I know, she's rolling off me, stopping my orgasm in its tracks. "In fact, you don't get me at all anymore. You wanna know why?"

What the fuck is happening? All the blood is concentrated around my dick and it's making it impossible to think straight.

"Alyssa—"

She whips around, naked and glorious, the tips of her hair just long enough to stroke her nipples. "Because this is *my* body. *My* pussy. *My* fucking orgasm. None of it belongs to you. They belong to me and I chose to give them to you. I allowed it to happen. But you know what? That stops. Right. Fucking. Now."

My breath is caught in my chest. There's no way she means this. Zero chance she's actually telling me no, right?

“You’re not the one in control anymore, Uri. I am. You want me? Then you better start treating me right.”

She turns and grabs the silver slip where we left it sprawled on the floor. When she bends to reveal her glistening wetness for the briefest of seconds, my head spins. She’s serious. The little *kiska* is truly denying me what’s mine.

I get off the bed and force my throbbing erection back into my pants. She peeks up warily like she thinks I’m coming for her, but instead, I march toward the door.

“You’re leaving?” she balks

“You did say you wanted your privacy.”

“Wait! It’s not the weekend now. Let me out!”

I shake my head. “That’s not happening anymore.”

There’s genuine horror on her face now and it makes something inside me shiver violently. *Push it down. Push it the fuck down, man.*

“You can’t do this!” she protests, following me towards the door, her slip strap falling off of one shoulder.

“Actually, I can.”

“But why? I don’t understand why I have to be down here. It makes no—”

I whip around, furious at her gall, furious that she’s under my skin, furious that she has the power to draw me down here in the first place. “You’re down here because that’s where you belong.”

She flinches back but she doesn’t back down. In fact, those blue eyes of hers just burn a little brighter. I’ve thrown more lighter fluid into the fire.

“You’re pathetic, you know that?” she hisses. “You do this every time. Every freaking time. Any time you get close to me, or talk to me, or let me in just a little, you freak out immediately afterward and you push me away. Don’t think I don’t know exactly what’s going on.”

Anger surges through my body instantaneously. Fuck lighter fluid—this is dirty fuel, the nastiest fuel possible. It'll hurt later. But for now, it's viciously effective.

“If you knew exactly what's going on, then you wouldn't be foolish enough to assume there's anything between us.”

Her eyes flicker. “There *is* something going on between us, whether you like it or not. The last few weeks—something has changed—”

“You're right. Something *has* changed. But not for the better. Don't you get it? I was *playing* with you, baby. That's what I fucking do.”

It's shallow and petty and I fucking hate myself for saying it even as the words come out of my mouth. But she believes it. Without a moment of skepticism, she swallows my ugly lies right away.

She believes without a shred of lingering doubt that she's meaningless to me.

Hell, maybe it's better this way. Better for her to believe I don't care at all than to believe that I care too much.

Fuck if I know for sure, though. I'm riled up and frustrated and horny and enraged at myself for getting into this situation in the first place.

“Nothing is going on between us. Nothing ever will. It was all about convenience. You were in my house; you were clearly willing. All you were to me is a shiny new toy—and I like breaking in my toys.”

Tears shine in her eyes. Each and every one of them makes me want to bite my tongue right off. “Y-you're lying...” She backs away, pale and trembling.

It's better this way, urges the sickeningly cruel voice in my head. *Keep going. Push past the point of no return.*

“Why would I lie? You saw the women that came before you. What makes you think you're any different? I just had to pretend in the beginning, to give you a reason to stay. It was easier than I thought—”

“Don’t.”

“—but like all new things, the shine wears off. The novelty wears off. You’re no different.”

A lone, fat tear slides down her cheek. She turns and runs into the bathroom. But even after she’s slammed the door on me, I can hear her crying. Loud, hurt sobs that echo inside the walls of my head.

What have I done? What the fuck have I done?

I push down the panic and try to think rationally. I did what I *had* to do.

So why does it feel so fucking bad?

ALYSSA

It's been days since our blowout.

The tape I pasted over the cameras has been removed. Svetlana brings me trays of food three times a day, but most of the time, the trays go back up untouched. I'm sure she's informing Uri of that fact, not that it changes anything. He still doesn't come back down here.

Which checks out, really. He told me that he didn't give a shit about me. I was the fool who was holding out hope that he was lying. And I wouldn't be doing that if I didn't have feelings for him.

Stockholm Syndrome is a motherfucker, as it turns out. I'm a therapist's wet dream at this point. If I didn't laugh about it, I'd have to cry about it, and Lord only knows when that would end.

I've indulged in tears often enough these last few days. It always begins the same way. I start reliving every moment that Uri and I have shared together. Not just the intimate stuff, but everything else. The conversations. The picnics. The side glances that felt like more than just a little peek when I thought he wasn't looking.

Despite the awful things that he said to me, I can't bring myself to believe that everything we shared before then was a lie.

I keep going around in circles until my head hurts and my stomach aches and I can't think straight anymore. I've

contemplated asking Elle for help, even if it means involving the police, but I still can't bring myself to pull the trigger.

Why, though?

Why am I still protecting him?

I've asked that question to the empty room more times than I can count. I have yet to receive an answer.

I spring to my feet when the bolt unlatches. Svetlana appears like clockwork for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. This is not one of her standard times. Which means it might just be—

“Lev.”

He pushes his head in uneasily, his eyes flitting around the room like he's scared of something jumping out at him.

I haven't seen him for days, so I assumed that Uri had ordered him to stay away from me. But I'm so relieved to see him. I'm so desperate for human contact. For any kind of contact.

He slips into the basement and closes the door but he stays pasted to the wall. His eyes never stop moving.

“Lev,” I say gently as I approach him, “are you okay?”

“I... need something.”

I smile reassuringly. “Okay. What do you need? If you want, I can help you look.”

“I need... something... I can't remember.”

“That's okay. How about you just hang out down here with me and I'm sure you'll remember at some point?”

He nods like he's agreeing, but he still doesn't move from where he's plastered against the wall. He lifts his eyes to me and then drops them again. As he does, he mumbles something so fast that I have no idea what he said.

“I'm sorry, Lev. I didn't catch that.”

“You look *sad*.”

Oh. I keep my cringe on the inside so he doesn't see it. “I suppose I was a little sad. But I'm not anymore.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re here, duh.”

That gets him to lift his head again at least. There’s a tiny, shy smile playing at the corners of his mouth. I gesture for him to join me in the reading nook that I’ve turned upside down in the last twenty-four hours.

“W-what did you do?” Lev asks, stopping short.

Oh, shit.

“Sorry, Lev. I was bored and I just started moving things around. If you don’t like it, we can change it back.”

His eyes dart around the space, taking it all in. All the changes. The little signs that I’ve been here, in his space, with his things. The panic builds in him like steam pressure. The speed of his eye twitches increases, his chin wobbles, the fingers of one hand tap against the inside of his other wrist again and again...

“Lev, listen to me, it’s all gonna be okay. Just breathe, okay? Just breathe.”

He takes three big breaths but his eyes never stop their erratic veering. “I... I... I...”

“Lev, sweetheart, listen to me. Nothing has changed here. Your books are still your books. Your chairs are still your chairs. Your beanbags are still your beanbags. It’s just a different set up... and it works a little better. See? You can reach the shelves from here.” I’m dancing around like an idiot trying to distract him from his too-big feelings. “We can put everything back if you really don’t like it. I promise.”

His hands have stopped shaking but he is rocking back and forth on his heels now. He looks at me and opens his mouth. I brace for the worst. Then he says...

“Why do you look like that?”

I blink. “Um, how do I look?”

His brow furrows. “Like a... crazy person.”

I stare at his deadpan expression for a moment. Then I burst out laughing. I laugh so hard that Lev actually takes a step back. “Oh, God—you know what, Lev? I *feel* like a crazy person.”

I comb through the knots in my hair with my fingers but I give up after I get stuck a couple of times. I probably should change out of these PJs, too. I’ve been living in them the last two days. They probably reek right now, both of B.O. and desperation.

“I’m sorry, Lev,” I say with a sigh as I run my hands over my face. “I don’t mean to freak you out.”

The rocking continues. “People say *I’m* crazy.”

I stop short and take a step towards him. He flinches so I hold my ground. “Who says that to you?”

“Just... people.” He shrugs. “When I go out, they stare. When I talk, they laugh. Sometimes, they just say it to my face.”

I grit my teeth, anger flooding through me so fast that I’m pretty sure my face turns red. “You’re not crazy, Lev,” I tell him softly. “Don’t let anyone make you believe that.”

“You’re not crazy, either,” he says. “Even though you look like it.”

I snort with laughter. “Thanks. I appreciate it.”

He nods solemnly. “Do you wanna sit with me? I’ll take the blue beanbag and you can take the green.”

He ambles over and sits down. I’m gonna count this as a victory. I haul my beanbag a little closer and plop down next to him. “I’m glad you’re here, Lev. I’ve missed you.”

“Me?”

“Are you kidding? Of course. You’re my only friend here.”

He blinks slowly, staring at me with those huge eyes of his. “I don’t have any friends.”

“Well, now, you do. I’m your friend.”

“I have a friend...” he whispers softly to himself as he wraps his long arms around his body. “I have a friend... I have a friend... I can tell Polly...”

“Polly? Who’s that?”

His head jerks up and his eyes bulge. “I-I-I... wasn’t supposed to say her name.”

My body goes cold. Does Uri have another woman up there? Has he already replaced me? Is that why I’m relegated to the basement for good now?

He did tell me the truth—he doesn’t care about me. He was using me. It was just sex for him. Oh, God. How could I be so damn blind? So damn stupid? So damn naïve?

“Uri’s gonna be mad at me...”

The rocking is back with a vengeance. All the tics are. Fingers, chin, muttering. I push down my own impending freakout in favor of taming his. “Lev,” I whisper calmly, pushing myself off the beanbag so that I can kneel down in front of him. “Lev, take a deep breath and look at me. It’s alright—Uri won’t be mad at you because I would never tell him what you told me.”

I keep repeating that until he starts to listen. He even lets me rest my hand on his knee. Little by little, the tremors ease.

When the rocking stops, I give him a smile. “You trust me, right?”

He offers me a tiny half-nod.

“I’ll take it.” I rub his calf gently. “Uri’s not gonna know a thing. This is our little secret.”

Lev nods more confidently now. “Our secret,” he repeats. “Because we’re friends.” Clearing his throat, he says, “Polly is my sister.”

The moment he says it, I recall one of our first conversations ages ago. He mentioned a sister at one point, hadn’t he? In fact, now that I think about it, he had mentioned another brother, too. But Uri never did.

Polly is their sister.

There's a distinct and undeniable sense of relief. But I wonder how rational it is. This information changes nothing at the end of the day. I'm still nothing more than a sex toy to him. A dirty little secret he wants to keep hidden away from the people he cares about.

I fall back on my butt and wrap my hands around my knees. "What's she like? Your sister?"

Lev shrugs. "I dunno."

"Come on, there must be something you can tell me about her."

"She likes to give me hugs," he says with a full-body shudder.

I smile. "It sounds like she loves you."

"I don't love her."

The words fly out of his mouth so fast that I can't quite believe them. "What do you mean? Of course you do."

He shakes his head. "No. She makes me sad."

For a moment, I'm worried that maybe this sister is not so nice to him. But considering he just told me that she tries to hug him all the time, I'm less than sure. "Can you explain that to me?"

He drops his chin to his chest. "Her... her eyes. Her eyes make me sad."

I have *no* clue what to make of that. So instead, I try something different. "Tell me, is she kind to you?"

He nods.

"Does she try to talk to you?"

He nods again.

"Does she play video games with you?"

Another nod.

"Well, it sounds like she's a pretty awesome sister. One who really cares about you." Lev doesn't really respond to that, except to keep rocking back and forth and muttering under his

breath. “I had a sister once and she was my best friend. But then she died.”

The rocking stops. “She died?”

“Yeah. A long time ago now.”

“My parents died, too.”

“I know. I’m so sorry.”

He blinks apathetically. “Does it make you sad that your sister died?”

“All the time.”

“Oh.”

“You’re so lucky to have your sister around, Lev. Trust me. Make use of the time you have with her. And more importantly, be kind to her, too.”

“How did your sister die?”

“She got sick.”

His eyes go wide. “That’s bad luck.”

Funnily enough, that’s exactly how I felt when Ziva was diagnosed. Of all the people on this planet, why did *she* have to get cancer? At sixteen! How is that possible? How is that fair?

It felt like the most incredible, awful, unbelievable bad luck.

“I know. It was bad luck. Just like what happened to you and your parents. Do you... remember the accident?”

He flinches and I immediately regret the question, but he answers anyway. “I only remember one thing.”

I don’t press him to continue. I figure if he just wants to leave this conversation here, I’ll let it go.

But then, after a very long silence, he continues. “Mama’s eyes. Hazel eyes with small brown spots in them. They were open. They were staring at me. But she wasn’t talking or blinking or smiling. She was just staring at me. For hours.”

My stomach curls. She died with her eyes open.

“Lev, can I take your hand?”

He considers it for a moment.

Then he nods.

URI

It feels good to set things on fire.

Watching things burn is the best way to temper rage. And I have enough rage in me to ignite a thousand different blazes.

The screams of Sobakin's men keep piercing the skies, tinging the orange plumes of smoke with their pain. It's fucking music to my ears. It's also helping to crowd out all the other unwelcome thoughts I've been grappling with the last few days.

“Boss?”

I look towards Artem, who's got blood splattered across his shirt. He's also got a Sobakin man by the collar. The bastard is bleeding from the gut, his hands desperately trying to holding together the gaping gash that will take his life sooner rather than later. “Do you want any alive?”

The man's eyes go wide. “No, please! Please don't. I have a family—”

“Don't we all,” I snarl without the slightest bit of feeling. “I want information, Artem. If they have none to give, then what good are they?”

In one swift move, Artem slices the knife in his hand across the man's throat like he's carving meat. More blood spills, mingling with all the rest, as one screaming voice silences itself forever.

This is the third of Sobakin's safehouses we've come down on like a plague in the last three days. It's the clearest message I

can think of to send.

I'm not playing around anymore.

More screams surround me as I walk through the burning house, hot embers biting at my skin. Another few minutes and we'll need to move out. I can already smell cooking meat. You'd think that human flesh would have a distinctive smell, but no. It smells like anything else.

It just goes to show—at the end of the day, we're all animals.

I notice a small pile of bodies in the corner. The pile is moving slightly and from underneath emerges a small man, trying to crawl his way out of his fate by playing dead.

He should have played dead a little longer.

He doesn't see me coming until I'm standing right over him with my gun pointed at his head. He lets out a tiny, terrified gasp and the smell of piss fills my nostrils.

Smoke and ash quickly swallow up the acrid tang. "Where do you think you're going, friend?" I rumble.

I shove him over with my foot and he collapses onto his back, revealing the dark stain on his pants. "P-p-please... don't kill me..."

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't."

"Because..." His eyes dart from side to side, hoping for a way out that I'll never let him find.

"Let me be very clear: you're a dead man. But at least you can have some autonomy over your death. Do you want it to be quick and painless? Or do you want it to hurt?"

His jaw starts quivering. "Don't kill me. Please."

"I killed every other man in this building. What makes you so special?"

"I-I have information."

I nod. "Yeah, so said all the other men I spoke to. They fed me lies and—" Another strangled scream pierces the air. *Perfect*

timing. “—now, they’re paying for it. Tell me: what’s your name?”

Beads of sweat slide down the side of his face. “Akim.”

“Akim. You seem like a smart man, Akim. Like tends to recognize like, wouldn’t you say?” He nods frantically. “Then you’ll believe me when I tell you that I can spot a lie a mile away.”

He struggles upright, as much as he can with a nasty, sucking wound in his ribs. “I won’t lie to you! I swear it.”

The fire’s licking my back now, oppressive enough to match the inferno inside me. “Get on your feet and keep walking until I tell you to stop.”

He scrambles upright and does exactly what he’s told until we exit the building. I walk him over to my vehicle and order him to stop. “Turn.” He turns slowly. His gaze is fixed on me. “Where is Sobakin?”

“I don’t know.”

I sigh. “Disappointing.”

“You wanted the truth,” he blurts, speaking fast. “That is the truth! I don’t know where he is because no one knows where he is. He knows you’re coming for him and he’s retreated into his personal safehouse. Only his inner circle knows where it’s located.”

“And you are not part of that.”

“No. He likes to keep his most trusted *vors* close.”

I smirk. Another strangled scream breaks through the thicket of smoke and fire. “He knows I’m coming for him?”

“He’s known for years now.”

That gives me pause. “Years?”

Akim nods. “He said that he always knew it would come to this, no matter how careful he was.”

I take a step forward and Akim flinches. His quivering legs look like they’re seconds away from caving. But his jaw

clenches and he stays upright.

“Tell me what he meant.”

Akim swallows. “This was before my time. I joined the Sobakin Bratva only a few years ago.”

“Poor choice.”

A sob escapes through his teeth. “I did it for my family. To keep them afloat—”

“If you think telling me about your sweet, beautiful wife and your sweet, rosy-cheeked children is going to sway me, you don’t know me very well.”

He blinks and moisture rolls down his cheeks. It could be sweat; it could be tears. It’s hard to tell at this point. It doesn’t really make any difference.

Akim clears his throat and tries again. “He’s boasted that... that he’s the one responsible for your parents’ deaths.”

My hand tightens on the gun. All this time, I suppose I’d always known. But hearing it out loud... I feel vindicated in my rage. I also feel as though someone’s breathed new fire into me.

“What else?”

“I don’t know the details. I only know this much because I overheard it. Boris always brags that he only lost one man, but the Bugrov Bratva lost the head of the snake.”

I scowl. “Except that Sobakin didn’t and still doesn’t understand something about the Bugrov Bratva: you cut off one head and another grows in its place.”

I raise the gun a little higher. Akim closes his eyes and breathes out softly.

It’s that one act that changes my mind—the fact that he doesn’t beg for his life. He prepares himself for death like a man, not a coward.

Time ticks past. In the background, I hear the wheeze and cacophony of one of the warehouse rafters giving way to the heat.

One eye peeks open. Akim realizes that my hand has dropped and the gun is no longer pointed at him. “Y-you’re not gonna shoot me?”

“No.”

“Why not?” he asks suspiciously.

“Because you gave me what I wanted.”

He looks even more confused now. “I barely gave you anything.”

“You confirmed something I’ve been grappling with for years. Thanks to you, I have clarity and purpose. Well—renewed purpose anyway.” I take a step towards him and he flinches back instantly. “But remember one thing, Akim: if you ever cross me again in *any* capacity, I will pull the trigger.”

He still looks skeptical. “Sobakin would never let me live.”

“I’m not him.”

He bows his head. “I... I can’t thank you enough.”

“Then don’t thank me at all. Leave before I change my mind.”

He stumbles away, refusing to turn his back on me. Only when he’s several feet away from me does he turn and start running as fast as he can.

“That’s a first.”

I turn around and find my brother staring at me with raised eyebrows. “It’s just like you to get here when the party’s over.”

He smirks. “I knew you had it covered.” Then his eyes veer past me. “And I was mostly right.”

“It was Sobakin. He was the one that killed Mother and Otets.”

Nikolai’s jaw clenches tight. “I could’ve told you that. In fact, I *did* tell you that.”

I shake my head. “You had a suspicion. You never had proof.”

“Did we need it?”

“Yes,” I hiss. “Yes, we fucking needed it, Nikolai. You think I want to start a war with a powerful Bratva *pakhan* for shits

and giggles? You'd think I'd risk my men, my family, for the sake of my ego?"

Nikolai holds up his hands. "Fine. But now, you know for sure. What are you gonna do about it?"

"Kill that motherfucker once and for all."

Nikolai smiles. "For once, Uri, we're on the same page."

URI

Don't do it.

The internal refrain is constant as I park my car and head inside. It's late, but I check on Polly and Lev first. Both are fast asleep in their beds, which means I have nothing more to distract myself with.

I end up in my office with a glass of vodka in hand and the refrain throbbing louder and louder in my head.

Don't do it. Don't fucking do it.

I figure turning on the monitor is justified. I need to know what she's up to. The last time, she taped paper over the cameras. Who knows what she could be doing now?

The screen flickers to life. I find Alyssa lying in bed with a crossword book over her lap. She's wearing the slip again and with her legs raised, I can see a little more than I bargained for.

Fuck.

I turn the monitor off instantly but the image is already seared into my brain, along with a few other mental fantasies I really need to get rid of. What is it about this woman? She fills me up with all this energy that needs to be spent, and none of my usual methods dim the need even one little bit.

I throw back the liquor, but the burn doesn't last long enough to distract me from the craving in my body. Seeing her on a screen isn't enough—I need *more*. I need her scent and her voice. I need her warmth and the glaring clarity of those dusky blue eyes.

Don't do it.

Don't do it.

Goddammit, I'm doing it.

I slam my glass down and make my way down to the basement. I have no idea what I'm going to say to her or how I'll explain my presence. All I know is that I need my fix. I'll figure out the rest after I get it.

Alyssa glances up when the door opens. Her eyes pass over me for maybe a second before she looks back at her crossword book. She doesn't so much as acknowledge my presence beyond that.

My ego tells me that this is just another tactic. But common sense tells me that she's hurt and she's just trying to protect herself.

I meander around the basement, pretending as though I've come to check on everything but her. I know from experience that she hates a long silence.

But the minutes tick by and still, she says nothing. As far as tactics go, if that's really what she's doing, this is a good one. The anger and frustration, I can handle. But this? Fuck this. Indifference is a beast that I'm not used to.

"Do you have everything you need?" I ask at last.

She doesn't look up from the crossword. "Oh, absolutely," she drawls. "I'm a very comfortable prisoner."

Okay, so there is some spark there. *Now, how do I light it up?*

"Has Lev been coming down here?"

"You should ask him."

"Alyssa."

"Uri."

She still hasn't so much as lifted her head and it's driving me crazy. Another thing that's driving me crazy? The fact that she hasn't pulled down her slip. I see endless thigh and the curve of her ass.

Surely she's doing that on purpose.

"I asked you a question."

"You sure did," she muses. "But believe it or not, you can't control everything, Uri. You can lock me down here and throw away the key, but guess what? I don't have to answer your questions. Same goes for Lev—he can do what he likes."

I scowl. "I don't control him."

"Really? Telling him where to sleep and who to speak to... That kinda seems like control to me."

"I'm trying to protect him."

Her eyes snap up to mine. *Finally*. "Just like you're trying to 'protect' me?"

"That's different."

She shrugs. "You can come up with as many excuses as you want, but at the end of the day, if you don't allow the people around you to make some decisions on their own, you're gonna lose them."

Her mouth quivers for a moment before she bites down, trying to stop the wobble. She slaps the book closed and throws it onto the bed beside her.

"Wanna hear a story? I'm gonna tell it either way, so you might as well say yes. About a year after she was diagnosed, my sister decided she wanted to stop treatment." A tear slips down her cheek as she swings her legs to the side of the bed. "We had so many fights. *God*, so freaking many. I even stopped talking to her for a couple of weeks."

I inch a little closer, my breath slowing in my chest.

"She managed to convince our parents that it was the right decision for her. Her leukemia was aggressive. She wanted to enjoy her last few..." Her sob stops her in her tracks. "Fuck. *This* is why I hate talking about Ziva. I start blubbering like an idiot."

"You're not blubbering."

She meets my eyes for a second. “The point is that I missed out on weeks with my sister because I was so busy trying to make her see things my way.”

“I would have done the same thing.”

She flinches and her eyes softly shutter. “That’s just it. It wasn’t my decision to make.”

“It was your job to protect her.”

This time, when she peeks up at me, she doesn’t look away. Like me, there’s a breath caught in her chest. Another tear runs down her cheek as she nods. “It was my job,” she agrees softly. “And I failed.”

“You didn’t convince her to start treatment again?”

She swallows. “I did, actually. By then, it didn’t make a difference. She spent her last few months in the hospital, puking her guts out, getting poked and prodded, hopped up on drugs that made her feel like shit.” The tears are coming fast now and all I want to do is hold her, but I know better than to venture close. “It wasn’t until the day she died that I realized how selfish I had been.”

“No,” I growl firmly. “You loved her. You wanted her to live.”

“I wanted her to live *for me*,” she corrects. “I made her life, her cancer, her pain all about me. I should have let her choose what *she* wanted. I should have given her the last few months of her life.”

I don’t consciously decide to move, but suddenly, I’m squatting in front of her, resting my hand on her knee. I notice the little spark of surprise in her eyes but she doesn’t try to move away from me.

“I have to live with that guilt for the rest of my life.”

“She died knowing you loved her.”

“She deserved more.”

“Most people do,” I agree solemnly. “Most people aren’t villains like I am. But the world isn’t fair.”

Her eyebrows pull together. “You think of yourself as a villain?”

I look at her in disbelief. “Don’t you?”

She looks down at my hand on her knee. It’s too late to remove it now, so I let it stay. “You like to pretend you are. But you’re not, Uri. You won’t make me believe that, no matter how hard you try.”

I can feel that little ripple of discomfort start to solidify. The same one that screams, *Don’t fucking do it* from the second I leave Alyssa’s company until the second I return.

“There it is,” she whispers with her eyes on me.

“There what is?”

“You may not know it, but you’re already looking for ways to push me away. I know that expression. I see it every time you pick a fight with me.”

My jaw clenches. I pull my hand away and get to my feet.

“Let me guess.” She laughs quietly. “You need to leave. I probably won’t see you again for days until you cave and come down to see me under some more false pretenses.” Dragging her eyes up to meet mine, she asks, “Is it so horrible to accept that I might be more than just your prisoner?”

“You *are* just my prisoner. You’re the one who’s trying to change the narrative.”

Alyssa just shakes her head in quiet disgust. “There it is,” she says again. “There it fucking is.”

“Just because you may know details of my life and my family does not mean you know *me*,” I snarl. “Don’t make the mistake of assuming you mean more to me than you do. But I suppose that’s typical of you.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Ziva told you what she wanted, what she needed, and you refused to listen to her.” Her eyes go wide. Even as the words leave my mouth, I’m aware of what a colossal fucking asshole

I'm being. And yet, I still can't stop myself. "Apparently, denial is your defining characteristic."

Her eyes go wide and I can see the tears standing there, ready to fall. "You... you *bastard*." There's a foot of space between us but it may as well be a mile-long road through hell. "Get out. Leave me the fuck alone."

It's what I wanted, wasn't it? A reason to walk away without crossing the line yet again. I got exactly what I asked for.

But no victory has ever felt more hollow.

ALYSSA

“I brought you something.”

Lev opens his fist to reveal a single purple flower from the garden. Except the petals have wilted from the heat of his palm and the stem has snapped. He stares at the flower, his mouth dropping open with frustration.

“I... I killed it.”

“No, no, it’s okay, Lev.”

That familiar rocking starts up again. “I k-killed it. I killed it. I killed it. I—”

“Lev.” My tone is sharp enough to get his attention. I reach out and take the flower from his palm. “I love it. Thank you.”

He looks unsure. “It’s dead.”

“It’s still beautiful. Did you know that purple has always been one of my favorite colors?”

The rocking slows down. “Really?”

“Oh, yeah. Always. How did you know that?”

He smiles shyly. “I guessed.”

“Smart guy.” I give him a wink. “Lev, can I ask you a huge favor?”

I spent the entire night thinking this over. Am I really going to use Lev to get me out of here? I kept hitting the same roadblock over and over again—namely, my conscience. It just felt so wrong to take advantage of Lev that way.

But I can't stay here much longer. The basement, I can deal with. The lack of sunlight, I can learn to live without. Even the limited number of activities is something I can force myself to adjust to.

But Uri? He's the one thing I can no longer be near.

So as much as I hate myself for it, it's Lev or nothing.

The door opens suddenly and the both of us cringe back. The voice that comes through is soft and feminine and completely new to me. A head appears around the door frame—short brown hair in a straight bob and large hazel eyes flecked with little spots of brown.

Just like her mama's.

“You must be Polly.”

She enters the basement, her eyes moving from Lev to me. “Who are you?” she asks tentatively.

There are little hints of Uri in her face. The sharp cheekbones, the straight line of her nose. But there's a softness in her features that Uri has never had.

“I'm Alyssa,” I say, offering her my hand. “It's nice to meet you.”

Lev looks frantic. His breathing is coming in short, sharp spurts, and he's chewing at the inside of his cheek hard enough to ripple the texture of his jaw.

I'm forced to turn away from Polly. “Lev, hey—everything's okay. Just breathe like I told you, remember?”

“Uri will be mad... Uri will be—”

“You let me deal with your brother,” I say firmly.

He glances at me curiously. “You'll protect me?”

“Always.” The moment I say it, I regret it. I don't plan on being here long enough to be a source of protection for Lev. As much as I care about him, I can't be a part of his life long-term.

“Why don’t you go play some video games?” I suggest. “I’ll come over in a bit.”

He gives his sister a wary glance and heads over to his special spot on the carpet. The moment his headphones are on, I turn to Polly. Whatever I’m about to say shrivels on my tongue when I see the awestruck look on her face.

“*How* did you do that?” she whispers.

“Do... what?” I ask, glancing back over my shoulder.

“You just stopped a meltdown in its tracks. You got him to listen to you. He never does anything I tell him to. Hell, I’m lucky if he so much as looks my way some days.”

“I just... I don’t know. I guess I bonded with him.”

Her expression ripples but she catches herself before her face falls completely. “So I guess everyone’s better with him than I am.” She eyes me cautiously. “Including the random stranger who’s squatting in the basement.”

I give her a sheepish smile. “I got lucky.”

“Now, the random stranger is trying to comfort me. This day just keeps getting better and better.” She sighs deeply. “So this is why Lev has been sleeping with Uri?”

My eyebrows shoot up. “Lev sleeps with Uri?”

“Well, he has his own room upstairs if he wants it, but Lev has nightmares. So yeah, Uri tends to sleep with him most days.”

I wish I hadn’t heard that. I’d prefer to just stay on the whole *he’s an asshole* train. Anything else is too dangerous.

“Seriously, who *are* you?”

I sigh. “My name is Alyssa. I live next door.”

“But you sleep in my brother’s basement?”

“I don’t really have much of a choice.”

Polly’s eyes go wide with horror. “Oh my God, is he keeping you down here? Are you his prisoner?”

She looks genuinely upset by the thought. Which is why I hold up my hands and shake my head. Even though I’ve thrown

that word around plenty myself. “I’m not... That’s not what... It’s complicated.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Listen, I know that’s grownup speak for *none of your business* but I’m not a baby. I can handle the truth even if it fucking sucks.”

I glance towards Lev, but thankfully, those headphones of his are doing the job. “I opened the wrong package,” I blurt out.

“What?”

Sighing, I gesture for her to follow me into the kitchen, where I pour myself a strong cup of coffee. “Can I get you anything?”

“You got any Oreos?”

I pass her the bag and a carton of milk. Then we sit opposite each other and I grab an Oreo, too. “I mistook your brother’s package for mine and I made the mistake of opening it.”

She cringes. “What was inside?”

“Nothing good. Anyway, once your brother figured out I’d opened it, he brought me down here for my own protection. That was weeks ago.”

“*Weeks?*” she shrieks.

“He let me out at one point, but I was forced back down here on the weekends. Up until a week ago at least.”

Polly pales. “Oh, God, I think that’s my fault. I come back on the weekends. And now, I’m on summer vacation.”

I reach out and pat her hand. It’s way too familiar for someone I just met, but it feels natural, so I just roll with it. “This is not your fault, Polly. None of it is.”

Her eyes focus on me. They really are the most striking pair of hazel eyes I’ve seen in a while. “You don’t want to stay down here, do you?”

“No. It’s hard to believe there’s a threat when you can’t see it. Sometimes, I think your brother’s asking too much of me to trust him implicitly.”

“He can be a real hardass.” She looks around uncomfortably. “It must suck to be down here all the time.” Her eyes find mine again and she adds, “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. None of this is your fault.”

“It’s just... It feels wrong to keep you down here. Why don’t you come back upstairs with me?”

My first thought is, *Where’ve you been all my life?*

My second is, *Uri will lose his shit.*

My third thought is, *Awesome.*

But I don’t want Polly to get caught in the crossfire. “Your brother wouldn’t be happy about that,” I say sadly. “You’re not supposed to know about me at all. He’ll get angry and Lev will get agitated and it’ll be a mess.”

Polly frowns. “Let me talk to Uri.”

“Please don’t. The moment you talk to him, he’s gonna stop you and Lev from coming down here, too. In any case, the two of us are... We’re not really on speaking terms at the moment.”

She squints at me suspiciously. “Is there anything else I should know about?”

“What do you mean?” I ask, the hairs on the back of my neck rising.

“I mean... is there something going on between the two of you? Like... romantically?”

I almost snort at her choice of words, though I manage to hold in my reaction at the last second. “There is *nothing* going on between us. He’s made it very clear that I’m nothing more than his hostage. In the nicest sense of the word.”

“Fucking hell,” Polly breathes.

I smile. “You swear like your brother.”

“Where do you think I learned it from?”

I can see it on her face: she’s a good kid, a principled one. Which is probably why seeing me down here is so hard for her

to process. But she also loves Uri. Which is another reason this is hard for her to process.

She and Lev—they're both just children.

“Listen to me: this is not your battle to fight, okay?”

Her nose wrinkles up. “What kind of person would I be if I just left you down here? I mean, they're gonna revoke my feminist card.”

I smile as I put my hand over hers. “How about this? If I ever need help, I'll ask.”

She arches her eyebrows. “Yeah?”

I nod. “Pinky swear.”

URI

Nikolai is waiting for me by the front door when I walk in. Judging from the harrowed look on his face, he's attempted to spend some time with Lev.

"What happened?"

He bristles defensively. "What makes you think something happened?"

"Your shirt is wet and you have a constipated look on your face."

Nikolai rolls his eyes. "I tried to get Lev to come swim with me. He took the suggestion personally."

"Lev doesn't swim. You know that."

"We need to push him a little more. If he can step outside his comfort zone, then maybe—"

"Maybe what?" I demand. "He can be normal? He can be like any other twenty-two-year-old?"

Nikolai holds up his hands. "You know what? Never mind. What happened with the surveillance run today?"

I swallow my irritation and take the pivot. "Stepan and I caught Boris leaving his hotel in an armored truck with a full team. He went from there to Midtown and that's where we lost him. He's clearly scared."

"And prepared."

"He's just delaying the inevitable. That's all it is."

Nikolai nods. “I might actually have an idea for how we can bring forward the inevitable.”

“Do tell,” I say, chucking my keys onto the foyer table.

“The little *kiska* in the basement.”

I freeze. “What?”

Nikolai’s watching me a little too carefully for my liking. There’s a glimmer in his eye that he only ever gets when he feels like he’s about to be proven right.

“She’s been noticed, brother. Something you should have expected when you decided to parade her all over the city. I’ve got it on good authority that Sobakin is planning on targeting Alyssa now. Clearly, he thinks she means something to you.”

“She doesn’t.” The words fly out of my mouth without hesitation.

“Then you won’t have a problem using her to draw him out.”

I have to try very hard to control my expression. “You want to use her as bait?”

“You have to admit, it’s a good strategy. The moment we dangle her in front of him, he’s going to pounce—” The very thought is making my hands clench into fists. “—and that’s when we trap him.” *Fuck*. “What do you think?”

“There are risks.”

“Every single plan we come up with will have a risk. At least this one has a high probability of succeeding.” Nikolai’s glare becomes more pointed. “Unless you’re trying to tell me you care about the—”

“It’ll work.”

Nikolai’s mouth snaps shut. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.” I smack him on the back on my way into the house. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, it’s been a long day.”

The moment I slam the door on him, I let my facade of indifference fall. Putting Alyssa directly in Sobakin’s path feels counterproductive. It feels wrong. It feels... unnatural.

But not doing it... what would that mean?

“Penny for your thoughts?”

I glance to the side as Polina appears from the corridor. I push myself off the door. “When you were little you used to go around saying, ‘*Polly for your thoughts.*’ Do you remember that?”

She cringes. “I was, like, three.”

“How old are you now? Four? Five?”

Flashing me a middle finger and a matching scowl, she asks, “Want some dinner? We made blinis.”

“‘We’?” My heartbeat quickens. Surely she doesn’t mean—

“Mariska and me. Not Lev. He still hates me.”

“He does not hate you,” I sigh with a sigh.

She *pshaws* as if it doesn’t matter one way or the other, though I know it hurts her that he doesn’t reciprocate her love as openly as she’d like. “Whatever. Do you want food or not?”

It’s not like Pol to be so short with me. The girl’s got an abundant reserve of patience. She reminds me of Alyssa that way.

No. Stop it. Stop thinking of Alyssa, goddammit.

“I’ll take a blini.”

She walks me to the kitchen and starts preparing a plate for me. It’s clear that she’s preoccupied, though. Her usual smile is gone and her eyebrows seem permanently glued together.

“Is there something bothering you?”

“I don’t know. *Should* there be something bothering me?”

I lean a hip against the counter and fold my arms over my chest. “Polina, is there something you’d like to say to me?”

“Is there something you’d like to say to *me*?”

Biting back my irritation, I say, “*This* is the day you decide to behave like a snotty teenager? Was there an occasion or you just wanted to be unpredictable?”

She gives me the stink eye and starts loading my plate with food, still pointedly not answering any of my questions.

“You haven’t poisoned those, have you?” I drawl. Her lips twitch but she refuses to smile. I clear my throat and try again. “So what have you been up to today?”

“Oh you know, same ol, same ol. Watched TV, went for a walk, read a book. Met the woman you’ve got trapped down in the basement.”

Wait.

“What?”

She pushes the plate towards me. “Alyssa. You know her? The pretty blonde in the basement. She and I had a little chat while Lev played video games. She’s really got a way with him. He seems so comfortable around her.”

I take a deep breath to steady myself, even though it feels like I’m being tossed around on a boat in the middle of a storm. “Did Lev tell you?”

“We literally just established that Lev barely talks to me. No, I followed him down there. I’m sure you’ve noticed that he’s not the stealthiest of people. Or the most secretive.”

“I told you to stay out of the basement,” I grit out.

“Well, I didn’t listen.” She jabs a finger in my direction. “You should have told me the reason why.”

“It’s none of your business, Polina. This is a Bratva issue and I don’t want you getting involved in it.”

“She’s miserable down there.”

“I’m aware.”

My sister’s eyes narrow. “She’s obviously down there because I’m up here. Now that I know, you can at least offer her a bedroom. No point in secrecy if the cat’s out of the bag.”

My jaw clenches. That would have made sense a few weeks ago. But now? After everything that’s gone down between Alyssa and me? I can’t imagine anything worse than having her around, in my space, spending time with my siblings. They

only met today and already, Polly is in my face, championing Alyssa's cause. The little *narushitel* must have some fucking witchcraft power when it comes to the Bugrov clan.

"You need to forget about her."

Polina's jaw drops. "You're not gonna let her out?"

"It's better this way. She won't stay in the basement forever. But for right now—"

"That's inhuman!" she snaps. "And you are not inhuman, Uri."

"I am when I have to be. You only know me as your brother. I am much more than just your brother, Polina."

She shakes her head with disappointment. "Say whatever you want; I don't believe you."

"You don't have to believe me. But you do have to trust me. I know what's best—"

"Don't!" Polly screams in a voice that I've never heard her use before. She sounds so damn *sad* all of a sudden. So damn *angry*. "Don't tell me that you know what's best for me. It's a lie. It's a fucking *lie!*"

"Polina—"

"I'm serious. That's exactly what Dad said to me before they left on that stupid drive with Lev. I had to stay behind because I had soccer practice and he refused to let me miss it. *Honor your commitments, Polina*, he told me. *You'll thank me later. I know what's best for you.* It's all fucking bullshit!"

I stare at her. "You've been keeping that in a long time."

She sighs and runs her hands over her face as all the fight dissipates from her body just as suddenly as it appeared. "I didn't mean to scream."

"It's okay. Screaming is healthy from time to time."

"I'm fourteen years old. I know right from wrong, Uri. I know exactly who you are. Being *pakhan* doesn't make you a villain. But keeping a woman locked in a basement against her will... that most certainly does."

I bite back my own anger. “You don’t know the whole story.”

“Yes, I do. Alyssa told me.”

Goddammit.

“How long were you down there with her?”

“Long enough,” she retorts, crossing her hands over her chest.

“What’s going on between the two of you?”

“Your new best friend didn’t fill you in?”

She rolls her eyes. “Oh, real mature. You know I’m supposed to be the teenager here, right?”

“I’m not doing this right now. Go to your room, Polly.”

“You can’t just send me to my room when you don’t like the way the conversation is going. You’re not my father.”

I advance on her. “I’m the closest fucking thing you have to it. Alyssa is down there for her own safety and she will stay down there until the threat has passed. Now, go to your room.”

She sizes me up. Then her jaw tightens in a gesture that looks all too familiar—because I see it every time I look in the mirror. “Enjoy your food,” she snaps. Then she drops the plate right to the floor. It cracks and shatters, dough and porcelain flying in every direction.

Polina doesn’t stick around to see the mess. She storms off, leaving a trail of melancholy rage in her wake.

The moment she’s disappeared upstairs, I turn and go to the basement. Alyssa’s already got Lev.

I’m not gonna let her get to Polly, too.

ALYSSA

He storms in like a tornado, all rage and chaos and turmoil. I'm guessing Polly went and spilled the beans, because there's no other reason for this visit. No other reason for that wild, unhinged look in his face.

I back up a little despite swearing internally that I was going to stand my ground this time. "For a man who says he doesn't want anything to do with me, you sure come down here a lot."

His eyes flare with azure flame and I bite my tongue. *Why are you goading him?* I tell myself Uri would never hurt me, but I've also never seen him look so angry.

He charges forward, forcing me against the far wall. He doesn't stop until his body is an inch from mine and his nose is almost touching my own. "So I hear you met my sister," he growls. His voice is deep and guttural. There's definitely anger there... but there's passion, too.

"You're acting as though I conned her into coming down here," I snap back. "She's the one who followed Lev. That's not my fault!"

"Maybe not, but shooting your mouth off about everything sure as hell is."

"Oh, I'm sorry. You can keep me hostage here but I can't talk about it? You get to treat me like shit but I can't react to it? You get to push your way into my space and I can't push—" I put my hands on his chest and shove. "*—back!*"

He doesn't budge an inch. Instead, his hands slam down on either side of me, trapping me. I should feel claustrophobic but all I feel is hot. Really, really hot.

"You can do whatever the fuck you want. Just don't do it with my siblings. Those two are off-limits."

"Mhmm, and have you told them that?" I demand. "Because they're the ones that came looking for me."

"Lev doesn't know any better and Polly wasn't looking for shit. She just—"

"You don't think she's looking for anything?" I scoff. "Try *attention*. Try *affection*. Try *honesty*."

"She has plenty of that," he grits out. But it's obvious that he doesn't believe what he's saying.

"Please. She needs you, Uri. And not just on random weekends. She's trying to make herself small so that you don't have to worry about her. But guess what? She needs more than she's willing to ask for."

He stops short and his fury abates for a second. Even his temper is not enough to distract from the worry he has for his sister. My heart aches as I watch those blue eyes unravel. "Did she say that?"

I sigh. "She didn't have to. I could tell just from talking to her. She's hurting, too, Uri."

He's looking right at me but his gaze is unfocused and distant. "She was the one that wanted to go off to boarding school. It was her decision."

"Might it have had a little something to do with the fact that Lev doesn't do well around her?"

Bam. Just like that, the focus is back on me. Intense enough to make me sweat. "What happened?" he asks. "Something must have happened between the two of them while they were—"

"Nothing happened," I say gently. "I just noticed that Lev was a little more standoffish with her than he is with other people. And Polly mentioned a couple of things, too."

His jaw clenches tight. “It’s gotten a lot better than it used to be,” he admits in a self-conscious rasp. “But right after his coma, he started... he started having panic attacks whenever he looked at her.” Uri strokes his beard stubble reluctantly. “I don’t know why. I still can’t—”

“I know.”

He looks flabbergasted. “You can’t possibly—”

“Her eyes,” I whisper. “She has your mother’s eyes, doesn’t she?”

He pauses and rears back to look at me from a new angle. The furrow between his brows is deep, gathering shadows. “How could you possibly know that?”

“Lev told me. He also told me that after the car fell down the ravine, he was trapped in that seat, staring straight at her. Your mom, sh-she... I think she died with her eyes open.”

He stares unblinkingly at me for a moment. “Fuck,” he breathes as his own eyes water and close. “*Fuck.*”

“Uri.” Without thinking, I reach out and cup his face with the palm of my hand. I place my other hand on his chest. It’s beating fast, filled with the kind of loss, the kind of pain that I experienced myself once. “I’m sorry.”

“He told you all that?” he asks with his eyes still hooded and low.

“It wasn’t, like, a whole thing. We were just talking. I mentioned my sister; he mentioned that. I didn’t even put it together until I saw Polly today. Her eyes—they were exactly how he described your mother’s eyes.”

He jerks away from me and I drop my hands. “Do you know how long I’ve spent trying to figure this out? Trying to figure out why he... why he... *fuck.*”

“Well, now, you know.”

He shakes his head in disgust. “I should have known sooner.”

“Will you stop?” I spit angrily. “Blaming yourself doesn’t help those kids. You’ve tried hard and from what I can see, you’ve

done a damn good job.”

“You don’t believe that.”

“Actually, I do. Don’t get me wrong: I think you’re a brute and an ass most of the time. But only towards me. To those kids... you’re their hero.” He shakes his head and I step forward. This time, I step into his space. “Don’t take it personally, Uri.”

“I don’t get it,” he says, sounding genuinely baffled. “Why would he open up like that to you and not me?”

“I’m not trying to change him.”

His eyes narrow. *Shit*. “No, why would you? You’re not here for the long haul. The only thing you want is to leave.”

“Can you blame me?” I cry out, gesturing around me. “Look at where I’ve spent the last few weeks. How am I supposed to want anything else? You won’t come down here to see me; you won’t talk to me. And any time we do talk, you push me away right afterwards.”

“Don’t you fucking—”

“It’s true!”

“What are you saying? If I paid more attention to you, then you’d be happy to stay down here?”

I freeze, feeling the heat of his gaze slide over my face and make my cheeks burn. “No, that’s not what I’m saying.” I gulp, but it’s too late to turn back now. “I’m saying that you’re obviously keeping me here for a reason. And more and more, I believe that reason has nothing to do with protecting me from outside threats.”

He scowls. His lips are maybe a quarter inch from mine. If I move even a hair’s breadth, my face will collide with his...

Which wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.

Resist. Resist. Resist.

A shiver runs down my spine before I speak. “You want me.” He doesn’t flinch. “But you’re afraid to want me. This isn’t just about sex and we both know it.”

“No. This is about you not knowing your place.”

I have no idea how, but suddenly, his fingers are entwining through mine. The heat of his chest is pressed against mine. It feels like we’re fusing together slowly and neither one of us can control it.

“You are never to speak to Polly or Lev ever again,” he growls.

I glare at him. “Make me.”

“*Fuck*,” he growls a moment before his lips slam down on mine.

Our bodies come together and it’s no-holds-barred, fully uncaged levels of chemistry. Surely he can’t be immune to this. Surely he can’t still believe that this is just sex.

No matter how good the sex may be, it doesn’t feel *this* good without a connection.

My tongue grapples with his as we each try to assert ourselves along this delicate line we’re threading. His hands slide over my body, tearing the clothes from me until I’m naked and shivering underneath him. He pushes up my leg and a moment later, I hear his zipper drag.

He touches my wet folds, sliding in and out of me before I feel his cock nuzzling my pussy. Moaning, I wrap my arms around his shoulders and wind myself as close to him as I can. His arm slides over my back and pulls me into him.

When he thrusts inside me, my eyes flutter closed. That’s the last moment of delicateness before we both fall apart. We share one long, shuddering breath—and then he fucks me harder than he’s ever fucked me before. He fucks me as though he’s trying to expel dark forces from my body. As though he’s trying to purge us both of something.

At some point between the intense thrusts, I stop thinking. I forget about the politics at play between us or the fact that I left a whole life behind when I climbed that fence. I forget about my best friend’s wedding and my dead twin sister and all the shit that populates my thoughts when I lie tossing and turning in bed at night.

Right now, I can only concentrate on the heat of those thrusts. The way his hands slide over my body, reminding me who I really belong to.

“Look at me,” he orders as I struggle to rein my body in.

My eyes meet his and that’s how we both finish—with our eyes fixed on each other and our orgasms only seconds apart.

Afterwards, Uri carries me to the bed and lays me down on it. He gets in beside me and we spend a long time just looking at each other wordlessly, recovering from what just happened, grappling with our own complicated feelings but refusing to share them with each other.

At least, that’s what I’m doing. I have no idea what he’s thinking. All I know is what I see in front of me.

He never looks away. His hand stays on my hip. There’s a storm brewing in those blue eyes but I’m left on the outside, looking in, like I’m watching through a window that refuses to open.

When he finally hauls himself out of the bed, I feel something sink to the bottom of my stomach. The realization that him staying with me in my bed was not a good thing.

It was a goodbye.

“Uri...”

“We can’t keep doing this,” he whispers softly.

I sigh. “I know.”

URI

“Something bothering you this morning, big brother?”

“No.”

“Really? ‘Cause you’ve been scowling at the coffee machine for the last minute like it owes you money, and before that, you seemed to have a grudge against the toaster.” Polly gives me a small smile. “Sit down. I’ll get you your coffee.”

“I can manage myself.”

“I don’t think you can. You’re about ten seconds away from hurling the coffee machine out of the window and I need my morning dose before that happens.”

I turn to look at my sister. In the morning sun slanting in through the skylights, she looks ageless and ethereal. She looks like our mother. “Since when do you drink coffee?”

“Since I realized I could get away with it without anyone noticing.”

Guilt pricks at me. Isn’t this exactly what Alyssa had told me yesterday? “Do you like your boarding school?”

She shoos me away from the coffee machine and takes over. “Sure. It’s fine.”

“Define ‘fine.’”

She shrugs. “It has its ups and downs, like anything in life.”

“You know you don’t have to stay there, right? If you wanted to come back home, that can be arranged. I can get you into

Scotswood Academy. It's only a thirty-minute drive from here."

She gives me a tiny glance. "What brought this on?"

"I was just thinking—"

"Is that code for *I spoke to Alyssa*?"

My face curdles into an instant grimace. "Not everything is about her."

"So she's not the reason you're in a foul mood this morning?"

"This is how I am every morning."

"Right. But today is, like, more so."

I roll my eyes and take the mug of coffee she's handing me. "How was she last night, by the way?"

"What do you mean?"

Pol walks her own mug over to the kitchen island and perches on the stool again. "Just wondering how she was, which I know you know, since I saw you skulking out of the basement after midnight." I grimace again and she smirks. "Busted."

"I was just checking on the security cameras."

"Oh, I bet you were. Is that what we're calling it these days?"

"Polina Bugrov."

"Oh, will you just admit it already? It's so obvious! You're *in love* with her."

I stare at my baby sister. It doesn't make sense that she looks so old and wise. The words don't make sense, either.

"Fucking hell, Polly—"

"You wanna know something?" She sips her coffee, winces, and adds in a heaping dose of sugar. "You walk around all big and macho, but when it comes to feelings, you're the biggest coward I know."

I clench my teeth. "I am not in love with anyone."

She sighs as she stirs. "Case in point."

“She’s just a random girl who got involved with the wrong people,” I say, studiously avoiding eye contact. “She’s no one to me.”

“Is that why you can’t seem to stay away from her?”

“We’re done with this conversation.”

“You’re just proving my point, you know.”

“There are some things that you just don’t understand.”

Her face screws up. “I’m fourteen, not a fucking idiot.”

“Watch your language.”

“Oh, you’re choosing *now* to police me on my language?” She laughs. “The ship already sailed on that one, big brother. Kinda like you and Alyssa.”

Before I can remind myself that this conversation should’ve ended a long time ago, I ask, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Polina looks quietly pleased that I’m so easily getting suckered into playing along with her. “It’s obvious that she has feelings for you, too. But she’s never going to be able to be open about them until you start being honest first.”

I can only shake my head. How the fuck did I end up here? Being advised on love by my fourteen-year-old sister?

She takes her coffee mug and lifts it into the air like a farewell salute. “I love you, Uri. You deserve to be happy.”

Then she walks out of the kitchen.

Sighing, I drink my coffee. It’s not nearly as strong as I need it to be, but I resist the temptation to add in as much whiskey as Polina added sugar. I need to get my day started and I can’t afford the distractions.

My first order of business—back Sobakin into a cold fucking corner.

I call Stepan, who’s been chasing a lead, one of Sobakin’s less cautious *vors*, for the past twenty-four hours. “He’s in a bar right now, boss. He passed out on the counter a couple of hours ago. Once he leaves, I can try to corner him.”

“He seems plenty cornered right now.”

There’s a second of silence. “Sir... if I go in now, it’d be public.”

“Good. I want Sobakin to get the message loud and clear. Send me your location and wait for me. I’ll be there soon.”

I’m on my way out of the house, relieved to be fucking *doing something* for a change, when I notice Lev skulking in the hallway just in front of the basement stairs.

“Lev.” He flinches, wringing his hands together so tight that the knuckles go white. “Are you going down to see Alyssa?”

He starts rocking back and forth. “Video games,” he mumbles. “Video games.”

Sighing, I put my hand on his shoulder and he jerks away violently. “It’s okay. Just go down.”

“You won’t be mad?”

Would it matter? Would it change anything? My anger hasn’t stopped a goddamn thing in this house from happening up to this point, so I don’t see why it would start working now.

“No. Go ahead.”

He gives me a big, goofy grin and lopes down to the basement. I watch him go with a weight on my chest that feels suspiciously like jealousy. Then I force myself out of the house and head to the location Stepan has sent me.

My motivations for taking down Sobakin are as strong as they ever were. Revenge for my parents. Closure for me and my siblings. Safety for Alyssa.

But now, there’s a question in the back of my head that keeps distracting me from the task at hand. It cuts sideways, like a splinter that just won’t let me pull it free.

What happens when it’s over?

When I arrive at the location, Stepan is waiting for me outside. “He’s not one of Sobakin’s senior *vors* but he’s on the fringes of the inner circle.”

“He’s good enough for our purposes. His head on a spike will send the right message.”

Stepan looks excited as he follows me into the bar. I should be, too. This is the kind of thing that I’m used to. This is the kind of thing that I’m good at. I’m inching closer and closer towards my goal and soon, Sobakin will be dust underneath my boot. I can avenge my parents and protect my siblings in the same breath.

So why do I feel so dissatisfied? Why do I feel like, in gaining victory, I’d be losing something else?

The answer is obvious. Once Sobakin is gone and Alyssa is safe...

There won’t be anything to stop her from leaving.

ALYSSA

ALYSSA: *I'm so sorry. Please don't hate me.*

LIAM: *Of course I won't hate you. Just please tell me what's going on?*

Lev took his headphones upstairs, so I'm back to text conversations with Elle. Which I honestly don't mind. If we were talking, she might hear the turmoil in my voice and that would only make her panic.

ALYSSA: *I'm fine. I swear. I'm safe.*

LIAM: *You say that a lot. Which is why I don't believe you.*

I sigh. It would be so easy to tell her exactly where I am. She'd get the cops involved and I'd be out of this basement in no time. Except for one thing—

If that happens, Uri and I would be done.

You'd think that'd be a good thing, right? But as it turns out, no part of me is actually onboard to believe that. Everything in me is screaming that it would be a catastrophic mistake. If there's even a slim sliver of a chance for the two of us, I don't want to destroy it by calling in reinforcements.

Which means I'm forced to wait this out. I'm forced to trust that Uri will let me go one day.

I wonder how long it'll be until I regret this.

ALYSSA: *Things are just a little... complicated, Elle.*

LIAM: *Does this have anything to do with the series of murders and freak accidents that have been happening all over the city?*

ALYSSA: *What do you mean?*

LIAM: *There was this warehouse in WeHo that burned down last week. The cops ID'd eleven bodies, all of whom were linked to this mafia guy named Sobakin. And then two days ago, this young guy who was murdered in a local bar in broad daylight.*

ALYSSA: *He was connected to Sobakin, too?*

LIAM: *That's what the news is saying.*

ALYSSA: *Yeah, I think it's all connected. Which is why I have to stay put for now. That also means I won't be able to come to your wedding. I'm so sorry, Elle. You have no idea how much I hate myself right now.*

LIAM: *Hey now, don't hate yourself. As far as excuses go, being targeted by a scary mafia dude is a pretty good one.*

ALYSSA: *You're the best, you know that?*

LIAM: *You're not completely off the hook. I expect you to make it up to me when you're out of... wherever the hell you are right now.*

ALYSSA: *Definitely. One hundred percent. Whatever you want, I'll do.*

LIAM: *Great. But that is contingent on you getting out in the first place.*

ALYSSA: *Don't worry. It'll happen. I promise.*

LIAM: *Is he treating you right?*

I have no idea how to answer that. I mean, the easy answer is "no." But I have a feeling that Uri is just as scared as I am about this whole situation between us.

ALYSSA: *He's a good man, Elle.*

LIAM: *He better be. Otherwise, I'm gonna kick his ass. I don't give a shit who he is.*

I snort with laughter.

“What are you laughing at?”

“Ahh!” I yell, dropping the controller and whipping around fast enough to get a kink in my neck.

Lev is standing there, wringing his hands together and looking curiously at the screen. “S-sorry. I’m sorry...”

“It’s okay,” I say quickly. “It’s okay, Lev. I’m sorry. You just startled me. I didn’t even hear you come in.”

His eyes veer to the screen. “Who’s that?”

I turn off the screen quickly and Liam’s avatar disappears. “No one. Just made friends with a fellow gamer, that’s all.”

Lev’s eyes go wide. “You were playing without me?”

“Er, just for a few minutes. It wasn’t as fun by myself, though.” I put the controller aside and get to my feet. “How’re you doing today?”

Lev shrugs and shuffles on his feet without saying a word.

“Do you wanna ask me how I’m doing today?” He nods and I take that as my cue. “I’m a little lonely down here. And bored. I miss fresh air. And sunlight. And picnics on the grass.”

Lev looks warily at me. “Uri said you have to be here.”

Right on cue, the door creaks open again and Polly pops her head into the basement. “What Uri doesn’t know won’t hurt him. Let’s take a field trip.”

We both glance at Lev, who’s looking very unsure. “Uri will be mad.”

“Uri could never be mad at you,” I assure him. “And anyway, we’ll keep this our little secret, shall we? Just you, me, and Polly.”

Polly moves forward gingerly. She’s always extra careful around Lev. “It’ll be fun, Lev.”

Lev ignores Polly and glances at me. “Do we have to pinky swear?”

“Sure, we can pinky swear. Why don’t you and Polly go first?”

Lev swings around towards her, but his eyes are firmly fixed on his feet. Still, he offers her his pinky with a rare surge of confidence. Polly gives me a hesitant smile and links pinkies with her brother.

He breaks away immediately after and turns to me. “Now, you and me.”

Once the all-important pinky swears are out of the way, Polly leads the way out of the basement. She and I make it into a game of hopscotch and Lev cautiously jumps on board. He even starts giggling once we’re at ground level, sneaking our way into the kitchen.

Of course, once we’re there, it only takes a couple minutes before we’re busted by Svetlana as we’re raiding the pantry.

She gasps when she sees me. “Miss Alyssa, you’re not supposed to be out of the basement.”

Polly steps right in front of me. “Alyssa’s not here, Svetlana,” she says with narrowed eyes. “She’s down in the basement where she belongs. It’s just Lev and me, getting snacks for our garden picnic. Yes?”

Svetlana’s eyes veer from me to Polly before she sighs and crumples forward. “Yes, Miss Polly.”

Polly practically jumps on Svetlana and squeezes her in a hug. “Thanks, ‘Lana. You’re the best.”

Once we’ve gathered up a whole bunch of ridiculously unhealthy snacks, we make our way to the west corner of the garden where, according to Polly, no one ever goes.

“You know your brother has security cameras everywhere, right?” I remind her. “He’s gonna find out about this little prison break at some point.”

Polly waves away my concern and spreads the picnic blanket under one of the sycamores. “Whatever. I can deal with him when the time comes.”

I watch as she puts the picnic basket down and starts pulling out Doritos and Milky Ways. It’s not until everything is

unloaded that she looks up at me. “What? You’re staring at me kinda weird.”

“Why would you deal with him on my behalf?”

“Because us girls gotta stick together,” she says with a shrug. “And because... I think you may be good for my brother.”

That takes me by surprise. I lower myself down onto the blanket and take the soda that Polly’s offering me. “Thanks.”

She smiles self-consciously. “It’s nice to have someone to hang out with.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “It is.”

URI

If Boris Sobakin didn't know I was coming for him before, he certainly does now. There's a dead *vor*'s head on his doorstep to attest to that.

Warily, I climb up the steps to my room. I'm passing the gaming room when I realize that there's sound coming from inside. It's uncharacteristically late for Lev to be up. When I push the door open, I find him sitting on the floor, eyes rooted on the screen. Polina is spread out on the sofa just behind him, her hands tucked beneath her face. She used to sleep like that as a kid, too.

There was a period right after the accident when she would sneak into my bedroom at night. The only reason it stopped was because Lev started having his nightmares and he needed me more than she did once the sun fell. But seeing her like this again... it brings me back.

I wave a hand in Lev's face to alert him to my presence. He grunts at me but doesn't take his headphones off until he's finished his game. I sit down beside Polina, moving her legs aside just a little to make room for me.

"You and Polly had a good day?" I ask him.

He mumbles something under his breath but I don't quite catch it. Pretty sure I heard something like *pinky swear* but that's all I can decipher.

"Do you wanna tell me about it, buddy?"

"No."

I frown. He's not usually so abrupt. "No? Surely you can tell me something about it."

He's not meeting my eye, which is a surefire sign that he's done something he's not supposed to do. Sighing, I pat his shoulder. "If you've been down to see Alyssa, it's okay. You're not in trouble."

He still doesn't really relax. Instead, he keeps looking at Polly. "Can't tell you about my day."

I raise my eyebrows. "Why?"

"Polly and me agreed."

All I'm hearing is that he and Polly are making headway. I'm willing to forgive a lot if it means the two of them can get closer.

"Well, then, if Polly and you agreed, you don't have to tell me what happened today."

Lev looks mollified by that reassurance. "I can tell you about my morning!" he says with enthusiasm.

"Go for it."

"I went downstairs to see Alyssa." *Big shock there.* "And she was playing video games."

That takes me by surprise. "Alyssa was playing video games by herself? Without you?"

"Yeah, she really likes it. She's even made friends."

I stop short, unease spreading through me like wildfire. *There's no way...* "Friends, you say?"

"Uh-huh."

Then it hits me. She can connect with people online. She can track down friends and family just as long as she has their usernames. Fuck.

Fuck.

I get to my feet slowly so that I don't startle Lev. "Buddy, it's late. You should get to bed."

"Should I wake Polly?"

“No, leave her. She looks comfortable.”

“Can I sleep in your bed?”

“Yes,” I agree distractedly without putting up a fight. I have another fight to gear up for.

The moment Lev is inside my bedroom, I storm into my office and hack into the console downstairs in order to access any and all conversations that Alyssa might have had in the last few weeks.

Scrolling doesn't do me any good, though. Every conversation box has been cleared. She's deleted everything. This'll take more technical expertise than I have available to dig up the records.

I slam my fist against the table. “Goddammit!”

I fly out of my chair and storm downstairs towards the basement. *I fucking trusted her.* That's the only thing running through my head as I burst into the basement, causing Alyssa to jerk upright in bed.

She's wearing that thin slip again and her hair is disheveled. “What's going on?” she gasps. “Is it Lev? Is Polly okay?”

The fact that her first thought is for them makes me even angrier. She doesn't *get* to be concerned for them. They're not her fucking family. And she's not ours.

“They are none of your concern,” I growl.

Her eyes widen as the sleep drains off her face. “Listen, it wasn't a big deal, okay?” she says cautiously as she gets out of the bed. “I only went up for a couple of hours and—”

“What?”

She stops short, clearly having assumed I know more than I do. “Um...”

“You came upstairs today?”

She sighs, her eyes darting from side to side. “I just needed some fresh air, Uri. It was no big deal. As you can see, I'm back in the basement prison.”

“Who did you use?”

Her eyes flash back at me. “I didn’t ‘use’ anyone. Polly and Lev—”

“*Polly and Lev!*” I explode. “You manipulated my brother and sister to get out of the damn basement?”

Now, she looks as pissed as I feel. “*They* came down to see *me*. We decided to go upstairs together for a bit. And it was great! Lev and Polly got along, we laughed, we talked. It was amazing and I won’t let you make me feel guilty for that.”

“Who the hell do you think you are?” I spit. “You think we need you? You’re not the fucking Bugrov sibling whisperer.”

Her face screws up, jaw tight and eyes flashing. “I don’t claim to be anything like that. But I do know that those two kids seek me out for a reason.”

“They’re bored—that’s all it is. They seek you out because they’re bored. Just like I do.”

Her entire body tenses. Then she grabs a pillow and flings it at me. “Get out! Get out of my basement!”

I probably should listen to her. I’m entirely too stressed and too pissed off for this argument. But I’m not about to let her win, either.

I stalk over to the gaming area, rip the Xbox out of the socket, and turn to her with the wires dangling to the ground like severed arteries. “How long has *this* been going on?”

Her face ripples with awareness. She knows exactly what I’m talking about.

“Answer me.”

She flinches, her entire body recoiling like someone electrocuted her. “It was innocent, okay?”

“Who did you contact?”

“Elle. She’s the only person I talked to and I didn’t tell her anything.”

“You really expect me to believe that?”

“Yes!” she snaps loudly. “Yes, I do expect you to believe that, because it’s the truth. I contacted her last week! If I’d told her anything at all, the cops would have swarmed this place days ago.”

I narrow my eyes. “If the conversations were totally innocent, then why did you delete them?”

“Self-preservation,” she throws at me. “I knew you’d fly off the handle. *Like you’re doing right now.*”

“Then why’d you do it at all?”

“Because she’s my *friend*, Uri. She’s my best friend and she’s getting married tomorrow and I won’t be there.” A sob escapes her lips but she keeps going. “I won’t be at my best friend’s wedding because I’m trapped here with *you*. I owed her an explanation at the very least. So yeah, I broke your rules and I contacted her and you’re damn lucky I did, too, because she was on the verge of contacting the police and filling out a missing person’s report!”

Her chest rises and falls heavily as she waits for me to break the pregnant silence.

I storm forward and push her up against the wall. This time, it’s different though. I’m not gentle and I’m not trying to be. I want her to know I mean business. I want her to know that I’m dangerous.

Her eyes are huge as my hand wraps around her throat. “You don’t have a right to privacy in my territory,” I snarl. “You don’t have a right to anything here.”

“Y-you’re... hurting... me.”

Her voice is small and trembling but still, I don’t remove my hand. Her eyes are filled with tears but she never removes them from my face. Somewhere, in the midst of those deep cerulean eyes, I can see that I’ve taken things too far. I’ve crossed a line that I might never be able to come back from.

And when I see the shock give way to fear, that’s when I know I’m right.

All the rage inside me shrivels. The animal inside me backs down.

But it's too late. It's too damn late.

I drop my hand and step back. She grabs her throat as though she's worried I've ripped it right off. She stares at me with wide, accusing eyes.

And I see myself reflected in them. Not a brother or a *pakhan* or a righteous man protecting the ones he loves.

Just a desperate coward who's losing control.

ALYSSA

The slam of the basement door feels like a gunshot.

I slide down to the ground as the sobs come in, deep and guttural and drenched with desperation. I pull my legs up, rest my head on my knees, and cry until I've expelled what feels like all the water in my body.

I need to get out of here. I need to get the hell out of here.

It's the only thing I can hear past my own sobs. My neck is raw where he touched me. It feels as though he singed off the first layer of skin and now, I'm exposed and vulnerable. That's how the rest of me feels, too. The slightest wind would bowl me right over.

I didn't think I'd ever be here, like this. Sure, Uri is dangerous and powerful and sometimes aggressive. But he would never hurt *me*. He would never threaten *me*. He would never do anything to make *me* feel unsafe.

Except he just did.

So there goes that unearned confidence, crumbling to dust. And in the wake of it, what do I have? Nothing. No choices, that's for sure.

I have to do this. Not just for me.

"For you, too," I whisper, pushing my legs away from my chest so that I can look down at my still-flat belly.

I put my hand on my stomach and try to sense the life growing inside me. It's been twenty-four hours since I accepted the fact

that my sore breasts, queasy belly, and lack of period were more than just stress symptoms.

I don't need a doctor to confirm it. I don't need a pregnancy test or a close read of the Plan B box to know that all those precautions didn't add up to shit. All I need is this feeling in my core. Call it nausea; call it instinct. Call it freaking karma, I don't know.

I just know that I'm carrying Uri Bugrov's baby.



I wake up the next day feeling strangely calm and strangely focused.

I didn't fall asleep until late but at least I slept through the night. Free of dreams or pee breaks, I come back to reality feeling... well, if not refreshed, then at least ready. Ready to take action, ready to *do* something.

Stripped of my sole lifeline to the outside world, I steer clear of the gaming station and wait for the inevitable visit from Lev. He shows up right after breakfast, his breath smelling of milk and sugary cereal.

"Morning, Lev. How are you?"

His face curdles as he takes me in and his gaze drops to the bruises around my neck. I can't blame him; I spent the better part of the morning staring at the aggressive purple-blue streaks banding my throat. They look a lot worse than they feel, but for the purpose of my plan, I'm fine with that.

"What happened?" he asks, immediately agitated.

"I, um... don't know. It's just a rash, I think."

He looks confused. "Rash?"

"A skin rash. It'll go away in a few days, don't worry."

"Does it hurt?"

"Stings, more like. But it's nothing I can't handle."

I smile sadly at his somber expression. There's so much love in this man. It's unfair that life has treated him so cruelly. "Lev, do you think you'd be able to do me a favor?"

His eyes snap up to mine. "F-favor?"

"Could you let me go upstairs again today?"

I see his hesitation right away. Fingers twitching akimbo as he chews at the inside of his cheek. "I don't know..."

"It would just be for a little bit," I promise him. "Just the very littlest bit."

He shuffles on his feet. "Can't we just play video games down here?" That's when his eyes go to the gaming station—or lack thereof, to be more accurate. His jaw drops with horror. "What happened?"

"Your, uh... your brother removed everything."

Lev ventures a little closer as though he's surveying a crime scene. "That's not nice," he grunts in a low voice, his body starting to rock back and forth. "My Xbox... my Xbox... my X—"

"Lev? Alyssa?"

I turn around as Polly appears at the door. She walks in, takes one look at Lev and the gaming station, then at the bruises on my neck—and her eyes harden into stone.

"Are you okay?" she asks me in a low, dangerous voice that reminds me strangely of Uri's.

I take a deep breath but I'm struggling with the sudden, unexpected sob catching in my throat. *So much for staying calm.* "I'm, uh..."

I blink back tears, which is all it takes to send everything skittering off the tracks. Polly strides forward and grabs my arm. "It's all gonna be okay," she murmurs in a voice so soothing that I just might break down on the spot. The only thing that stops me is Lev. He's upset enough as it is. Seeing me boo-hoo crying would push him over the edge.

“Lev, why don’t you go to the upstairs gaming room and play there?”

He ignores her and starts combing through the fallen pile of video games that Uri knocked over when he was ripping out the console.

“Did my brother do that to you?” Polly whispers to me. She’s still got her hand on my elbow, but rather than grounding me, it’s making me feel shaky.

Gently, I extricate myself from her and wrap my arms around myself. “It looks a lot worse than it is.”

“I can’t believe him.”

“Polly, this is not your fight.”

“He can’t treat you like this. Especially when it’s obvious he —” She stops short and takes a deep breath. “What can I do for you? Ask me anything and it’s yours.”

She’s probably asking me if I want a cup of tea or an ice pack; something doable, something reasonable to ask a fourteen-year-old. But ice packs won’t fix me. Tea won’t save me.

I have to get out of here.

“It’s a big ask,” I warn her.

Polly nods. “I said anything. Tell me.”

“I have to leave, Polly. I can’t stay here anymore. If I do...” I just about manage to suppress my sob, but I still get a curious glance from Lev. “I’m sorry; I know I shouldn’t be asking you at all. I don’t want to put you in the middle but—”

She clutches my arm again. “I’ll help you.”

“Really?”

Polly nods fervently. “Yes.” She lowers her voice. “But we need to move fast—and Lev can’t know.”

“Okay. Yeah, of course. Whatever you think is best.”

“If you can convince Lev to go upstairs to the entertainment room, I think I can come up with a plan from there. I’ll meet you there.”

She doesn't give me a lot of time to process before she disappears up the basement stairs, leaving the door wide open. I turn to Lev and approach him cautiously. "I'm so sorry about your gaming nook, Lev."

He flinches when I get closer. "My Xbox..." he repeats.

"You have a nicer Xbox upstairs," I remind him. "With a ton of better games. Cooler games, in fact. Maybe we can go up and check them out?"

Lev considers that for a moment. Then, finally, he nods, though it's reluctant. I lead him up the staircase towards the ground floor. We almost cross paths with Svetlana, but she pretends she doesn't see us as she ducks into an adjoining room.

Lev calms down considerably when we get to the entertainment room. I'm shaking so bad I can barely see straight, but I manage to start up a game for him.

I'm prepared to sit in the corner in the fetal position and wait for Polly. Lev, though, is having none of that.

"Please?" he begs. "You said you would play with me."

Sighing, I grab a controller and pretend to be interested in the game. But the whole time, I keep watching the door, waiting for Polly to show up.

I've lost my second race in a row when she finally appears. She pushes the door open just enough to expose a sliver of her face and gestures for me to join her outside. Glancing nervously at Lev, I put my controller down.

"Lev, I need to use the bathroom. Can you give me a few minutes?"

He puts his controller down, too. "How many minutes?"

I twist in place helplessly. "Um... a few. I won't be long." I feel like an absolute villain lying to him, but who knows how long this window of opportunity will remain open? And I have to think about my baby. My hand twitches towards my stomach but I suppress the instinct and get to my feet. "You

keep playing, okay? I won't be long. Just keep playing. I'll be right back. I'll be back before you know it."

I know I'm repeating myself, but the nerves are making me jabber way more than I need to.

Polly is waiting outside the entertainment room when I manage to slip away. "Everything okay?"

"I've disabled the cameras on the south side of the perimeter," she explains with a calm precision way beyond her years. "And I arranged a diversion in the northeast corner. The moment I set it off, you'll be free to escape over the south fence."

"Set *what* off?"

She allows herself a small, mischievous grin. "I found some leftover fireworks from last New Year's in the storeroom. Once I get you to the fence, I'll go set them off. That sound will be your signal to move. Now, c'mon—less explaining, more escaping."

I keep peeking over my shoulder, worried that we're going to be discovered by one of the staff. Polly sees my anxiety. "Don't worry," she says. "The maids are all gossiping down in the kitchen."

I suppress a snorted laugh. *Don't worry*—that'll be the freaking day. I'm gonna be worrying about Uri Bugrov for the rest of my natural life.

Soon, we get to the farthest corner of the south side of the house, which happens to be one of the living rooms that overlook the same lawn where I used to spy on Uri and Lev playing football. Polly has me duck so that security can't see me through the large bay windows that dot the walls.

"I'm gonna leave you here, okay? Stay out of sight until you hear the signal."

I grab her arm as she walks past me. "Polly, I can't thank you enough."

She gives me a heavy-hearted smile. "I love my brother, but he doesn't get to imprison women in the basement. No matter the

reason. Not on my watch.”

“You’re amazing, you know that?”

She blushes as she runs out the door. I duck down and wait for the fireworks to go off. The queasiness rears its ugly head again like the life inside of me is as scared as I am.

It’s okay, little one, I think, beaming my thoughts down toward my womb. I’m doing this for you. We’re going to be okay.

But the silence stretches on for what feels like an eternity. Every so often, I peek out the window. There are two burly security guards on either side of the lawn. They cross over at regular intervals, scanning back and forth as they do their rounds.

More seconds tick by and I start to wonder if something’s gone wrong. Did someone stop Polly? Is she okay? Have I gotten her into trouble already?

The door slides open and I’m sure it’s going to be her, coming back to tell me that she couldn’t make the fireworks go off and the whole plan is kaput. Except it’s not Polly. It’s—

“Lev?”

His eyes are wide and curious when they land on me. “What are you doing? Why are you sitting on the ground?”

All I can think is, *I’m so screwed.*

ALYSSA

“Lev, why don’t you go back to the game room?”

He shakes his head. “Not unless you come with me.” His hands are trembling and he’s got that pinched lip expression that usually means he’s in one of his stubborn moods. Which, obviously, is the last thing on earth I need right now.

“I can’t right now, Lev. I’ve got something I have to do.”

“What do you have to do?”

“It’s, er... complicated. Could you just go back to the game ___”

“No!” he shouts aggressively. “No, no, no. You want to get rid of me!”

I spring up to my feet without thinking. “Hey, now, shhh, calm down, Lev. I don’t want to get rid of you. I just—”

BOOM. BANG. POP. BANG.

Lev slaps his hands over his ears, drops to his butt on the floor, and starts rocking everywhere. “No! No! No!”

“Lev,” I beg. “Lev, calm down! They’re just fireworks, honey. It’s okay.”

But it’s not okay. Because he’s losing it and I want to help—but I’m also gonna miss my window to escape if I stay any longer.

I look outside and see the security guards running in the direction of the explosions. The lawn is empty—but I know it

won't stay that way for long.

"Lev, please. They're just fireworks. You're gonna be okay. I promise!" But I doubt he can even hear me. He's still got his hands clamped hard over his ears. I twist around on the spot, trying to figure out what I should do.

Stay and deal with Lev?

Or leave and hope that he'll be okay?

If it were only me, I'd choose the latter. Despite Polly's efforts, I just wouldn't have been able to justify leaving Lev in that state.

But it's *not* just me anymore. I have my baby to think of.

"I'm sorry, Lev," I say with a heartbroken hitch in my voice. "I'm so sorry."

Then, biting back tears, I turn and sprint out through the door. Down the stairs, out the side exit, across the lawn as fast as I can, the wind drying the tears on my cheeks. When I reach it, I scale the fence the same way I did the first time, what feels like an eternity ago. I'm at the top of the fence when I realize that Lev has followed me outside.

"You can't go!" he wails. "You can't go! Come back."

"Lev, please go back inside," I cry out, perched with one leg toward freedom and the other toward him. "You have to stay with your brother and sister."

He doesn't seem to be listening to me as he starts scaling the fence after me.

I blanch at the thought of him trying to mount it himself. *If he falls...*

"No, no, Lev! Please, you can't follow me. Stop. Go back."

He's mumbling fast under his breath and refusing to listen. Desperately, I look out ahead. I'm high enough that I can see a few guards in the distance. Luckily, they have their back to me for now, but that can't possibly last much longer.

I start to reach down for him, but as I do, I slip and lose my balance. "Shit!" I cry out as I overcorrect and go tumbling

down on the far side of the fence, back on what is harder and harder to think of as “my” side.

I land heavily, the air blasting out of my lungs. I’m too dizzy to stand up or say anything, so when Lev drops to the ground next to me a minute later, I can barely protest.

“You have to go back home,” I tell him in a stern but breathless wheeze, doing my best to push him back toward the fence.

He frowns. “Then you have to come, too.”

“That’s not how this works! I can’t go back—but you can.”

“No.”

I’m hearing the sounds of approaching voices. Which means I’m officially out of time. I turn and sprint towards my house with Lev hot on my heels.

I’m rushing around to the back door when I realize one of the kitchen windows is broken. One step inside reveals that it’s not the only sign of destruction.

My home has been turned upside down.

My belongings are littered everywhere. There’s broken glass, broken plates all over the floor. The cabinets and drawers have all been dumped out and cast aside. Couch torn to shreds, stuffing dusting every flat surface like fresh snowfall.

Did Uri do this? Or was it someone else?

“It’s messy in here,” Lev remarks in disgust.

Breathe, Alyssa. Freaking breathe. I don’t have time to dawdle. I need to grab a few essentials and get the hell out of here.

I snatch stuff mindlessly. My tablet, my passport on the foyer table, other random shit. Lev shadows my every movement.

“I want to go home now,” Lev complains as I check to make sure the tablet is charged before I stuff it into the first backpack I can find.

It powers on. *Thank God.* I'll be able to withdraw cash, to buy an airplane ticket, to message Elle and see what she can do to help. This is my last lifeline.

"Can we go home now?"

The panic is making me sweat excessively. I dab it out of my eyes and squeeze his hand in both of mine. "Lev, that's *your* home. It's not mine. It's time for me to leave."

He shakes his head like that'll change reality. "The basement is your home now. I don't mind sharing..."

He's so sweet; I hate having to be this cruel to him. But the panic isn't helping curb my impatience. I leave the house through the backdoor and make a roundabout detour to the main road.

I'll have to walk a while before I can hail a cab. But I can't do that with Lev following me.

It's time to say goodbye.

I set my bag down at my feet and turn to him. "Lev, I'm really sorry, but I can't come back with you."

He looks heartbreakingly confused. "Why not? You belong to us now. You belong with us!"

I hear the whir of an engine in the distance. Maybe I can hitch a ride to the highway and escape from there. *The window is closing, Alyssa. Now or never...*

"Don't go!" he sobs when I say nothing.. "Please don't go."

The engine gets louder. *Make your choice, Lys. Now or never. Now or never. Now or—*

"Oh, Lev. I'm so sorry. I just..."

I stick out a thumb. The car stops. But I'm so desperate to make Lev understand that I don't see what's happening. I don't process the two men climbing out of the car until they're right on top of us.

Black guns.

Black masks.

Black intentions.

They grab Lev first. I expect him to scream. Yell. Kick. Fight. Freak out. Something. *Anything.*

But the shock of being manhandled shuts him down completely. The moment the masked men grab hold of him, Lev goes catatonic. He disappears into himself. The lights are on, but there is nobody home.

Which is why I kick it up a notch. I scream. I yell. I kick. I fight back for the both of us.

It just isn't enough.

The second man points a gun at Lev's temple and looks me in the eye. "Stop or I'll blow his fucking brains out right now."

I go deathly still, panic burning a hole in my throat. "Please don't!" I gasp. "Please don't hurt him. I'm begging you."

The man clutching Lev in a vise grip has a high, nasally voice. The one pointing a gun at Lev's head has a deeper, commanding one. I can see both their eyes through the holes in their masks, but neither pair looks remotely sympathetic.

"Please, I'll do anything. Just let him go."

"Anything, huh?" asks the nasally one. "Maybe if you suck my cock, I'll consider it."

I stare at Lev. His face is a complete blank. He's looking down at his shoes as though he's frozen.

"He's not dangerous. He won't fight back!"

The asshole holding the gun looks at Lev's face for a moment. "Yeah, she's right. Just stick him in the back of the van. He's the dumbass. Brain-dead, that's what the boss said. Crash knocked him stupid."

My blood boils immediately. Rational thought goes kaput as I lunge for his throat with bared claws, screaming like a wild banshee.

It almost, almost, almost works. He's so taken aback by my reaction that he stumbles to the side, his arm twisting towards me. I realize a moment too late that it's the hand holding the

gun. I can only watch in horror as the black mouth of the weapon comes closer and closer and—

BANG.

I feel the searing heat of a bullet missing my scalp by mere inches. “Fuck!” the nasally one swears. “Hurry up, man; we gotta get the fuck outta here.”

“Lev!” I scream. “Lev—no! No, no, *no!*”

“We don’t got time. Leave the girl. We’ve got him!”

I hear the screech of wheels; I see the barrel of the gun. But still, I run towards the two masked men.

BANG.

The second gunshot is even closer than the first. It grazes over the back of my triceps, close enough to rip through my clothes and the first layer of skin. Pain like a hot brand erupts and sends me to my knees on the gravel. Even still, I try to crawl toward the van.

But it’s too late.

The rear door slams shut on Lev’s frozen face. Gray exhaust fumes from the van flood the air and sting my lungs.

And the van races away... taking Lev with it.

URI

They have Lev.

That's what Polly said to me when she called, crying hysterically and blaming herself for Lev's abduction.

My first reaction was denial.

It's just not fucking possible. Lev never leaves the house, much less the grounds. He'd never venture out long enough to be exposed that way. I had to wait until Polly was coherent enough to explain how the hell everything had gone so wrong.

Alyssa wanted to escape. I helped her. And Lev followed Alyssa.

The denial turned to shock. Shock turned to anger. And the anger curdled into something so thick, so dark, so destructive, that I was ready to set the whole goddamn world on fire.

Nikolai's in the passenger seat, clinging to the armrest as I rip down the road at a hundred and twenty miles per hour. He has the forethought not to tell me to slow down or be careful, probably because he knows I'd just tell him to go fuck himself.

I'm pretty sure the car's still moving when I jump out of it and storm into the house. I'm already wild with anger—but seeing Alyssa sitting on the floor of the living room with tears streaking her face and Polly's arms wrapped around her makes me even wilder.

“Get the fuck up!” I snarl.

Polly's eyes go wide but Alyssa looks almost resigned to what's coming. She shakes Polly off gently and rises to her feet without so much as a word.

"Did you think I was just fucking around?" I demand in a low voice that I've learned from experience packs more of a punch than screaming ever has. "Did you think I was keeping you here because I fucking *wanted* to?"

She flinches. "I-I'm sorry—"

"Sorry?" She takes a step back, but I'm not letting her away that easily. I snare her arm and twist it towards me. She lets out half of a strangled moan but presses her lips into a tight line to keep it from emerging fully. "You're *sorry*? No, you don't get to be sorry. Does 'sorry' bring Lev back? Does 'sorry' get him out of harm's way? Does—"

"Uri!" Polly tries to pry my hand off Alyssa. "Stop! You're hurting her."

I refuse to let go. "I'll deal with *you* later."

I can tell from the dried tear tracks on my sister's face that she's been crying, too. "Why don't you deal with me now?" she snarls.

"Polly," Alyssa interrupts in a small voice, "it's okay. Stay out of this."

"No!" she insists fiercely. "I'm not gonna let you take the fall for this on your own. I'm responsible, too."

"Yes, you are. Why the hell would you help her do this?" I growl. "I told you I had a reason for keeping her down there."

"And I didn't buy it," Polly snaps right back at me. "Just because you're in charge doesn't mean you get to be an asshole."

I can see Nikolai in my peripheral vision, standing by the door, taking it all in. Sometimes, I can't get him to shut up. But when I need some support, he stands there silently. Go fucking figure.

"Because of you, they have Lev!" I spit as my voice rises. "Because of you, he's in actual danger! He can't even handle

going out in public, Polly. Now, he's in the hands of my worst enemy and—

Her indignant scowl starts cracking. Her mouth turns down; her chin shakes. It's slow at first and then she breaks down all at once, dissolving into tears so big that it takes me a while to understand what she's muttering under her breath again and again.

“This is all my fault. This is all my fault. This is...”

“No, it's not,” Alyssa interrupts earnestly, grabbing Polly by the shoulders. “It's mine. I'm sorry. I should never have gotten you involved.”

“That's *right*,” I glower at her. “You shouldn't have. Now, you're gonna pay for it.”

I grab her arm and tear her harshly off Polina. Nikolai moves aside to let us pass. I can feel my sister at my back, screaming something, but I'm blocking her out. Nothing else exists in my mind besides the little *narushitel* who keeps crossing lines she never should've ventured near.

Nikolai stays behind to deal with Pol as I drag Alyssa back to the basement. Actually, I don't have to drag her at all. She comes willingly, without saying a word.

I spin her into the basement so hard that she nearly stumbles over. She manages to stay on her feet and she pivots around slowly on the spot. Her eyes are hazy with fresh tears.

“Uri.” Her voice is barely a whisper, so why does it feel like she's shouting? “I'm so sorry.”

A better man might take mercy. But I don't have the capacity for forgiveness right now. I'm not a better man. I never will be.

I stare at her for one long moment. Then, before I can do something I'll regret, I slam the door in her face and storm back upstairs to my office.

Nikolai is already there when I enter. “Polly?” I ask.

“She's in her room. She's pretty upset about this.”

“As she should be. I can’t believe she chose Alyssa over me.”

Nikolai raises a wary brow. “It’s not all about you, Uri.”

“That’s rich, coming from you.” Nikolai opens his mouth to snap back but I hold up my hand, stopping the argument in its tracks. “We don’t have the time for this sibling rivalry bullshit. We have to come up with a plan to get Lev back.”

Nikolai sighs and nods. “We have to go in fast.”

“Fast and brutal. But establishing contact is going to be hard. Sobakin has been a recluse for weeks.”

“Which means he wants us to come to him.”

It’s exactly what I *didn’t* want to do. I wanted to draw him out, to force him to make the first move. But now, the entire dynamic has changed. The power has shifted back in Sobakin’s favor.

“I sent in a team to investigate the girl’s house,” I say wearily. “It’s been ransacked. A few personal items have been taken, including a laptop. Which means Sobakin has had eyes on her for a while now.”

Niko doesn’t say it, but the unspoken words hang between us. *You made her a target the moment you took her out in public.*

I ignore that, just like I’m ignoring all the other inconvenient truths in my life right now.

“We’re going to the Black Rose.”

Nikolai’s eyes go wide. “Are you kidding?”

“Does it look like I’m kidding?”

“We mounted an attack on that place only *weeks* ago. It’s nothing anymore.”

“Which means it’s going to be filled with only Sobakin’s people. There’s going to be someone in there who can give us a lead. And maybe we can use that to get our brother back.”

“Uri. *Uri.*” He follows me out the door but I’m not about to hang around just to listen to him punch holes in my plan. I

keep moving until I've burst out of the house. "For fuck's sake, man, slow down!"

I swing around so fast that he nearly collides with me. "I'm doing this, Nikolai. Lev isn't used to being out there at all, let alone without me, without someone he can trust. These men, if they do to him what they did to Igor..." I trail off, losing myself in a black hole of negative thoughts. "I'll never forgive myself."

"This is not your doing."

"*I am his guardian. I bear responsibility for him. Whatever happens to him is my fault. Now—are you with me or not?*"

Nikolai takes a deep breath and nods firmly. "Let's go."



We're halfway to the club when I get a call on the car phone. I accept it and Stepan's voice rings through, loud and clear.

"Boss, my source just got back to me about the abduction."

"And?"

"Boris Sobakin is not behind it."

I must've heard him wrong. There's no way. Judging from the look on Nikolai's face, however, I didn't. I swerve around the corner and park the car on the curb.

"What do you mean?"

"My source is legit, boss. Whoever abducted Lev... it's not Sobakin."

I frown. "I can't take the risk that that's not true."

"Barging our way into the Black Rose without all the information is probably not the best idea, brother," Nikolai offers in a measured voice.

My head is racing. "Wait... is it possible that the men who've been watching Alyssa's house are a different enemy altogether?" Nikolai looks skeptical, but my thoughts are

moving too fast for me to stop and ask him for his opinion. I turn back to the phone. “You said a bunch of personal items were taken from the house. A laptop?”

“Yes.”

I nod. “I have her cell phone. Maybe there’s a way to track the laptop from the phone.” Nikolai’s eyes go wide and I take that as a good sign. “If we can track it, we might be able to find Lev.”

It’s a long shot, but it’s the only one we have.

We have to find my brother.

ALYSSA

I'm crying too hard to worry about breathing. The only thing keeping me tethered to reality is my Z charm, but the more I tug on that, the more I wonder if the link is just gonna give up and shatter one day. If there were ever a day for that to happen, it'd be this one.

But I can't stop touching it. I can't stop moving. I can't stop crying. If I don't do any of those things, I feel as though I'll go insane.

Honestly, it might go that way regardless.

All the *what ifs* keep running through my head and no matter how much I try, I can't stop them from taking over my consciousness.

What if I made Lev go back sooner?

What if I'd never tried to leave in the first place?

Now that he's been taken, my escape feels selfish, thoughtless. Just plain stupid. I put my needs above his and this is the result.

Guilt. Pain. Fear.

I'm not going to be able to calm down until I try to make things right. Which is a tall ask when you're trapped in a soundproof basement with no one around.

All my links to the outside world are gone too. Uri took away the Xbox and...

Wait. My tablet!

I've been so in my own head, I forgot that I can use the tablet to maybe contact someone. Or perhaps even track my laptop. I hadn't seen it in my destroyed house and if my ransackers took it, it's possible the tablet could tell me exactly where my laptop is. Which could be exactly where Lev is.

Maybe.

Hopefully.

My heart is thudding hard as I rush to the bed where I discarded my backpack after being pushed into the basement by a furious Uri.

Every time I blink, I see that heartless scowl staining every beautiful moment we've shared together. Will he ever forgive me?

That look in his eyes said no.

I try to turn the tablet on, only to realize it's dead now. I didn't bother looking for the charger back at the house, which means I have no way of using it.

"Come on, come on," I mutter as I start combing the basement looking for a charger I might be able to rig up.

Half an hour later, I come up blank, my hopes deflated, my chest rising and falling painfully with the disappointment of it all.

"Ahhh!" I scream wildly toward the ceiling. "Uri! Please, let me out of here!"

I know he can't hear me. No one can. No one who cares, at least. But I scream anyway because at the very least, it's something to do.

And then—

Click.

I rush to the door, unsure of who I'm gonna be faced with. Then I see her dark ginger hair and those startling hazel eyes. "Polly!"

Her eyes are swollen and her cheeks are blotchy but there's a determined slant in the set of her jaw that I resonate with.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t come earlier,” she explains. “I had to make sure my brothers were gone.”

“Do they know where Lev might be?”

“I don’t know. They weren’t super eager to share with me, as you might imagine.”

“I’m sorry, Polly. This is all my—”

“We don’t have time for that now,” she interrupts. “We need to find my brother.” I can tell she’s been on the same emotional rollercoaster as me in the last hour. “I heard some of Uri’s men talking earlier. Apparently, your laptop is missing from the house.”

I clutch her hopefully “Yes! But they left behind my tablet. If we can charge it—”

Polly’s eyes go wide as she finishes, “... then maybe we can maybe track it.” She nods, all action immediately. “Charger. Got it. I’ll be right back.”

She disappears upstairs and a few minutes later, returns with a charger in hand. We plug it in and then both of us huddle over it. I catch sight of our reflection in the black glass and look away immediately. I want to feel hopeful—but the look in my face says I’m already fearing the worst.

“Now, we wait.” The seconds move slower than they ever have. Every sound is overpowered by my stampeding heart. I can’t deal with long silences, so I break it with the other thing that’s been circulating in my brain since Lev was taken. “Can I apologize to you now?”

Polly sighs. “We had the best intentions. It went wrong. You’re not to blame, Alyssa.”

“Neither are you.”

“I know that. But it doesn’t matter. I should have protected him.” She tilts her head to the side and looks at me curiously. “You really care about him, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do. And I would do anything to get him back.”

Polly's smiling at me when the charging icon changes to the lock screen. We both suck in a breath at the same time. I snatch up the tablet and type in my code with trembling fingers. It takes me only a few seconds to get into the device sharing app to check on the location of my laptop.

"They have it," I say confidently. "About... forty minutes from here. Toward Pasadena."

Polly looks at the screen. "I think that's where we'll find Lev." We exchange a glance. "I... I need to tell my brothers. They can head there immediately."

"Go ahead."

She pulls out her phone and calls Uri first. No answer. She tries Nikolai next. No answer there, either.

"Fuck!" she yells, dropping her arm. "They're not picking up."

"Polly, I don't want to repeat past mistakes—but this is different. If you let me out, I can grab my car and go after Lev myself."

She nods. "I'm with you. Let's go."

"Whoa," I grab her hand before she can fly out the basement door. "No, no, no. I can't take you with me."

"You're not going without me."

"I'm not about to put you in danger. I've already fucked things up with Lev. If you're hurt, too, Uri will never forgive me."

"Why do you care if he forgives you or not?" My mouth opens but nothing comes out. Polly waves a hand in my face. "Yeah, I know. 'It's complicated.' I don't care about your weird, dysfunctional relationship with my brother right now. All I care about is getting my brother back. You can't do this on your own."

"Yes, I can. Polly please—"

She plants herself in front of the basement door, arms folded across her chest. "Either I come with you or I lock you in and do this on my own. Your choice."

I stare at her, wide-eyed. "You wouldn't."

“Watch me.”

“Polly—”

“Ten, nine, eight, seven... Hurry, the offer will expire in six, five, four, three, two—”

“Okay, okay, *okay!*” I shout. She grins mischievously as I concede. “You little terrorist. You’re a Bugrov, alright.”

She smiles as we head up the stairs. “My brothers took a bunch of men with them, so there’s limited security on the estate. Makes it easier for the both of us to get out.”

“We can try getting out through the south side again. The fence leads right to my place.”

Polly nods. “But first, we need provisions.”

She ducks into a room that I’ve never been in and I’m forced to follow her inside so that I’m not seen lurking in the corridor by one of the maids. “Polly, what provisions are you talking—*Polly, wait!*”

I stop short when I take in the room. *Guns*. There are guns everywhere. Mounted on the walls, displayed behind glass shelves, organized behind oak cabinets. There’s a separate section for the rifles, another nook for ammunition. It’s like Rambo’s wet dream in here.

“My God,” I breathe, standing there in shock.

Polly turns from one cabinet to reveal she’s holding a gun in each hand. “Here,” she says, passing me one.

I back away quickly, not wanting to be anywhere near that kind of thing. “What are you doing?”

“Alyssa, these are dangerous men we’re dealing with. We can’t just walk in unarmed.”

“Polly, I’m not even sure how to use one of these.”

“That’s okay. I do. It’s pretty simple. You load it, cock it, take aim, pull the trigger. Make sure the business end is pointing at the bad guy. Oh, and don’t miss.” She forces the gun into my hand. “Don’t worry—the safety’s on.”

I squirm in my skin. Since the moment I climbed that fence, it's been like Alice down the rabbit hole. In my world, laundry day is on Sunday and I spend a lot of time thinking about if the sparrows will come to the bird feeder outside my window in the morning. In Polina's world, there are rooms full of guns and bad men in white vans coming to kidnap her brother.

Things are different here.

"Come on," Polly says urgently, tugging me forward. "The coast is clear."

We have a shockingly easy time getting through the house. The south lawn is clear in every direction, save for when one harried guard hustles through on a lightspeed lap of the perimeter. But he's alone and when he disappears towards the north gardens, Polly and I are able to scale the fence without a problem. No loose nails to ruin my life this time around.

Once we clear the fence, Polly and I rush around the house to my tiny garage. I locate the spare key and pray that my gas tank has some juice left in it.

"Please work, please work, please work..."

It's not until the engine sputters to life that I let myself take a breath. Polly jumps in the passenger seat quickly and I get the feeling she's worried I'll leave her behind. I might have seriously considered it if I didn't think she was totally capable of shooting my wheels and siccing her brothers on me.

I take a deep breath. "Are you ready?"

Polly nods. "I'm ready."

And so it begins.

Kind of anticlimactically, though. It's forty-two minutes of the most silent, boring drive ever. It feels like we're commuting to war, which is a hilarious contradiction of mind-numbing and heart-attack-inducing.

But forty-two minutes pass one way or another. By the time we arrive, my hands are sweaty enough to slide right off the wheel.

When the houses start thinning out, I park the car on a lonely corner of the street and Polly and I head up the hill towards the location the tablet pointed out.

We see the house once we crest the hilltop. It looks nonthreatening, totally normal—but that’s probably the exact reason Lev was brought here. No one who didn’t know better would turn an eye.

Anxiety prickles at my skin as I turn to Polly. “This is the plan: we poke around, try to figure out where they’re keeping Lev. Once we’ve found him, we try to get him out as fast as possible. If anyone comes at you, shoot. Until then, stay behind me.”

“I’m the one who knows how to shoot. Shouldn’t you be behind me?”

I narrow my eyes at her. “There’s no negotiation on this one. I’m the adult here and you’re gonna listen to me.”

Polly sighs. “Fine. I’ll cover you.”

“Come on. There’s no one on this side of the house. We can sneak up to the windows and try to see if we can see inside.”

So far, I haven’t seen a single person on the property. I’m hoping that Lev’s abductors are so confident in their anonymity that they’re taking it easy. If we can take them by surprise, we might have a chance of rescuing Lev.

I glance down at the foreign weapon in my hand. I really don’t want to have to use the gun. But I know that if it comes down to protecting Lev or Polly...

I won’t hesitate to pull the trigger.

I force Polly behind me as I prepare to round the corner. Stupidly, I have my eyes on her when we turn. Which is why I don’t see the huge man looming directly in my path. I knock right into his hard chest and as I do, I have three distinct thoughts in quick succession.

I’ve failed Lev.

I’ve failed Polly.

How could I have failed so soon?

URI

Niko keeps scrolling through all the info Stepan has sent us. “Based on this location and the information we’ve dug up on Sobakin... this isn’t him.”

I grimace at the road as I drive. “Only Sobakin would have enough motive to try and take Lev. Who else would dare?”

“The Bugrov Bratva is powerful, brother. With our kind of reach and influence, the enemies come out of the woodwork.”

“It still could be Sobakin,” I say stubbornly. “He could have hired mercenaries. This might just be a ploy to cover his tracks and avoid retaliation so Lev’s abduction can’t be blamed on him.”

Nikolai purses his lips and keeps refreshing the laptop’s location. “Have you told the men where to meet us?”

That’s the second time he’s asked that question. I’m too stressed to be polite anymore. “I’ve already told you I have.”

Nikolai’s scowl gets darker. “You can’t blame me for checking. Your judgment hasn’t exactly been sound recently.”

“Say what you feel, brother,” I snarl. “Don’t hold back.”

His face screws up even more. “You want to know what I think? Fine. Lev would never have been taken if it weren’t for your obsession with this girl. You should never have moved her into the house, much less the basement.”

I open my mouth to argue—but then I realize I don’t have an argument to make.

He's completely right.

I made an error in judgment by bringing Alyssa into my home and exposing her to my family, my world, my enemies. I turned a blind eye to her budding relationships with both Polina and Lev because it seemed to be helping all of them. But that was a mistake on my part.

"I just never pegged you for the type of man who could be so easily turned by a pretty face."

She's not just a pretty face. The thought comes unbidden and I try to push it away. It doesn't matter at the end of the day. So what if she's different than the women I've been with before? So what if I can talk to her?

What does that matter if I can't *trust* her?

"We're gonna get Lev back," I assure Nikolai through gritted teeth. "And once we do, Alyssa will be shipped off somewhere far away and we can all go back to our lives as they were."

Nikolai doesn't respond except to say, "We're almost there."

I park at the bottom of the hill and step out of the car. We check our equipment, then Nikolai and I walk up. He coordinates with my men. I can only brood on all the mistakes I made that brought us here.

"There's the house," Nikolai points out.

The house in question is a modest two-story building with an overgrown garden hugging the corner. If it wasn't so neglected, it might have looked idyllic. As it stands, the red brick walls are crumbling and the grass is dying of thirst.

"I'll take the left. You go right."

Nikolai nods and pulls his gun out, then starts creeping in his direction, squads of Bratva men fanning out behind each of us. I head off the other way, weighing my gun in my hand. There was a time when it used to feel heavy against my palm. I was so aware that I was toting death. Now, it just feels like an extension of my hand. Part of me. Like violence fused right to my skin.

I can hear movement from around the back. It can't be Nikolai; there's no way he would have made the circuit so fast. Tensing instantly, I take the corner hard...

And someone smashes into me, completely blindsided by my presence.

I have to say: the feeling is mutual.

"Alyssa!" Two pairs of wide eyes stare up at me in shock. "Polly!"

"Oh, fuck," Polly mutters. "We're never gonna hear the end of this one."

Alyssa holds up her hands and inserts herself directly in front of Polly. "Don't yell at her. This was my idea."

"I'm not going to yell at her," I growl, grabbing her hand and pulling her towards my chest so that I can snap right in her face. "*You* are the fucking problem here. Do you ever just do what you're told?"

"Seriously, Uri." Polly scowls at me. "When did you become such a brute? Let go of her."

I glare at my sister. "Aren't you in enough trouble as it is? Do you really want to make this worse for yourself?"

Undaunted, she glares right back at me. "Are you trying to leave more bruises on her body? The ones on her neck just aren't enough for you?"

"Polly," Alyssa says softly, "it's okay."

Instinctively, I reach out and sweep the hair from around Alyssa's neck. The bruises are bright and colorful—and horrifying. Because I know *I'm* the one that caused them.

Fuck me. Nothing is going to plan. No matter how hard I try, it all keeps spiraling right out of my hands.

I drop my arm. Alyssa backs away slowly, still keeping her body between mine and Polly's. "Listen, I used my tablet to track my laptop. We figured that Lev would be in the same place. Polly tried to contact you and your brother but when you didn't pick up, we decided to come ourselves."

It's a reasonable explanation—except for the part where she brought my fourteen-year-old sister along for the ride.

“I'll take it from here.” I take a step towards Alyssa and bend down so that my nose is only an inch from hers. “Take my sister back home now. If you're not there when I get back, I'll assume you decided to go off-book. You will be outside my protection and your life will be yours to lose. Is that understood?”

She nods.

I pull up my gun and offer it to her. “Here. Take this. Use it if you have to.”

She doesn't so much as blink, nor does she take the weapon in my grasp. But she does pull out another gun from the waistband of her jeans and dangles it in front of me. “Thanks, but I've got my own.” She turns and grabs Polly's hand. “Come on, Polly, let's go.”

What the fuck? Who is this woman?

There's a newfound air of confidence rippling around Alyssa as she leads Polly away from the house. It's almost enough to make me feel like she can handle this. That maybe, a part of her was made for this kind of life, with these kinds of stakes.

Nikolai comes around the corner just as Alyssa and Polly get to the slope. “What the fuck? Is that—”

“They decided to stage a rescue mission of their own. Now, they're going back home.”

“My God, you really don't have any control over her, do you?”

I have no idea which one he's talking about. But at this point, I doubt it matters; he's right either way. I have no control over either one of them.

“Text security back on the estate. Tell them to inform me the moment they get back home.”

“*If* they get back home,” Nikolai mumbles under his breath before he looks up at me. “We'll deal with that later. I know where they're holding Lev.”

I tense up immediately. “You found him.”

“He’s in a room around that corner where I just came from. I couldn’t see anyone else apart from two men. Both armed.”

I duck low and follow the structure of the house until I arrive at the first window. I poke my head up from the far corner and catch sight of one of the two enemy soldiers that Nikolai spotted. I make sure to hide behind the patch of bramble creeping up the side of the window so that I’m properly camouflaged.

When I take a second peek, I spot Lev. He’s been tied to a chair by his legs and arms. His head is bent so low that his chin is practically touching his chest. He’s shaking slowly, a simmering, full-body roll that betrays his state of terror.

I want to fucking *murder* every single person who did this to him.

Soon enough, that’s exactly what I’ll do.

I just need to figure out a way to get in and make sure he doesn’t get hurt in the process. This is my whole job. Making sure Lev is safe. Making sure Polly is safe. Making sure Alyssa is—

I shake my head, trying to force her name out of the equation. *She’s not family. She’s not mine to protect.*

It’s Lev and Polly I need to take care of. They *are* mine to protect. And if I can’t do that... if I can’t keep them safe...

Who even am I?

ALYSSA

Anxiety rolls through my belly like a thundercloud.

I have the gun tucked back into the waistband of my pants, but I keep thinking, *What if it goes off?*

Stop it. You have to stay calm. For Polly.

I've still got her hand in mine, but she's dragging her feet a little too much for my liking, throwing glances back over her shoulder every few steps.

"Come *on*, Polly," I gasp. "We have to get out of here."

"But Lev..."

"Your brothers have Lev. They're gonna bring him back home. I promise."

She rips her hand out from underneath mine and glares daggers at me, and for one insane moment, it's not her I'm seeing—it's Ziva, tall and proud and defiant beyond her years. Then I blink and my sister is gone again. Just like she always has been.

"You can't promise me that. You have no idea what's going to happen. Lev is not like other people, Alyssa. Even if they do get him back, we have no idea if he's gonna be okay."

Her eyes are wide and glistening with tears. She's let the mask of maturity drop and behind it, I can see the scared little girl who's terrified for her brothers.

"Plus, he already hates me! And now, I've gone and gotten him abducted. I need to be there. I need to be there with

them.”

She tries to run past me back up the hill, but I grab her and force her to a standstill. “I know this is a lot, but we’re not equipped to handle this situation, Polly. Your brothers—”

“I’m *sick* of leaving everything to them! They don’t get to call all the shots all the time. I get a say, too. I’m part of the family, am I not? I count. I matter.”

I grab her hands and nod. I’m desperate to get her out of here, but I also want her to know that I’m hearing her. That I’m listening. “No one could ever think you don’t count, Polly. You’re an amazing young woman and you were prepared to risk your own safety to come here and help Lev. That counts for something.”

She looks skeptical—for good reason, too, because no part of my little speech is designed to give her the impression that I’m letting her go back to that house of horrors. “Please. Let me go back up. I just want to know that it’s all gonna be okay.”

I pull her closer to me. “Sometimes, the best thing we can do is trust another person, Polly. More often than not, it’s the bravest thing we can do. Now, I promised to get you back home safely—and that’s what I’m gonna do.”

A helpless tear slides down Polly’s face as I pull her down the slope towards my car. My stomach feels heavy. So do my feet. I wish I could stay as badly as Pol does. Like her, I just need to see Lev. I need to know that he’s okay.

We reach the car. The house is out of sight now, tucked away behind the hill. But the clouds feel low and foreboding, like they’re hanging just inches above our heads, and the cold sweat under my arms prickles uncomfortably. The day just feels *wrong* somehow.

Then I hear her scream.

“*Argh!*”

My car keys drop as I whip around to see a massive man grabbing Polly. Her legs flail out furiously but her screams are muffled by the wet rag he’s pressing against her mouth.

What is that smell...?

And then it hits me—chloroform.

I'm reaching for my gun when someone tries to grab me from the back. I just about manage to stumble away from his grasp, but I don't get far before another pair of arms descends on me.

"No!" I yell, kicking my legs out the same way as Polly.

Unlike her, I wrench free of whoever is trying to hurt us. I fumble with the gun and get it out and aimed at the masked men swarming around us, though heaven knows I'm not even sure if the safety is off. I'm as much of a threat to myself as I am to them.

"She's packing. Hurry," someone grunts.

My hands are shaking as I try to remember Polly's instructions. *You load it, cock it, take aim, pull the trigger...*

"Come on, come on..." I raise my arm, ready to pull to let it rip. "Ahh!"

Before I get my chance to prove I'm not as useless as everyone thinks I am, a fist connects with my stomach. The gun flies out of my hand and I hit the ground hard, seeing stars. I'm moving as soon as I fall, trying to recover to my feet, determined not to lose Polly the same way I lost Lev.

Uri would never forgive me. And I couldn't blame him: I'd never forgive myself, either.

But upright or in the dirt, it doesn't make a difference—I'm outnumbered. More men converge. They grab my arms and my legs and no matter how hard I thrash, I can't break free. My foot connects with something, but it's not the skulls of these evil motherfuckers—it's just the side mirror of my car. The kick takes it clean off and it crashes to the ground, spraying shards of glass everywhere.

As the men flip me upside down and prepare to shove me into their van, I catch sight of my reflection in one of the broken shards.

I look unhinged. Hair flying everywhere, eyes wide and desperate, mouth parted in a heaving inhale. In that same

reflection, I see one of my captors pull a rag from his pocket and bring it toward my mouth.

“No...”

But it doesn't matter what I want anymore. He presses it over my face and that chloroform stench invades my senses. My stomach throbs with pain and my last half-formed thought before I see darkness is, *My baby...*

ALYSSA

Everything hurts.

My arms and legs are stinging in a thousand places. My head is aching and my gut roils uncomfortably. Even blinking my eyes hurts.

It's dark wherever I am, but after a few minutes, my vision adjusts to the darkness just enough to confirm that all my limbs hurt because I've been tied to this bed.

There's nothing to see in here—bare concrete walls, water-stained ceiling—apart from a second bed with a dark lump on it. “P-Polly?” I get only a whimper in response but she's starting to take shape and I'm pretty sure it's her. “Polly, it's me. Alyssa.”

“A-Alyssa... where are we?”

Suddenly, my pain feels so much less important. All I can think about is Polly, tied up like I am, terrified and helpless.

“I don't know, sweetheart.”

“The same people that took L-Lev... they took u-u-us... oh God...”

“Hey, Pol,” I say softly, using the same voice I use with Lev, “I need you to take a deep breath and concentrate on my voice, okay? We need to stay calm.”

She lets out another couple of sobs, but slowly, she finds the rhythm of her breathing. It still shudders, but it's less soaked with fear than it was a moment ago.

I blink and a tear slips down my cheek. I remind myself to take my own advice. *Breathe*. After a couple of breaths, my own inhales and exhales even out.

“We’re going to get out of this.”

“Is that another promise?”

“It’s a hope and a prayer all wrapped up in one.”

“I don’t believe in prayers. They don’t come true unless you make it happen.”

I laugh tearily. “That sounds like something Uri would say.”

“Actually, it *is* what he says. I used to hear that all the time from him when I was growing up.”

I nod. “It’s hard to believe in a higher power when you’ve lost people you love early in life. I had a crisis of faith when I was a teenager.”

“What happened when you were a teenager?”

I didn’t intend to talk about Ziva. I mean, I never consciously intend to talk about Ziva—but I’m also realizing that talking about her doesn’t feel quite as impossible as it used to. I wonder when that happened. “I lost my sister when I was seventeen. We were twins.”

“Oh my God.” Polly straightens up as much as her restraints will allow. The moonlight through the window is falling on her in slanting beams, casting half her face in a pearly white glow. “That must have been rough.”

“I’m thinking no rougher than losing your parents at... How old were you?”

She chews on the inside of her cheek. “Seven.”

“Do you remember them?”

“Parts of them,” Polly admits. “I remember Mama tucking me into bed at night. I remember Papa swinging me in the air and carrying me on his shoulders. But sometimes...” She sighs. “Sometimes, I’m not sure if I’m remembering my dad or if I’m remembering Uri.” The unshed tears sparkle in the gloom.

“He replaced a lot of memories for me. There are days when I don’t know if that’s a good thing or not.”

“Are they happy memories?”

“Yes.”

“Then it’s a good thing.”

She smiles sadly. “How did your sister die?”

“Cancer. She was diagnosed with leukemia right after we turned sixteen. It was a rough year and a half.”

“I know this might sound... bad... but at least you got to say goodbye, y’know?”

I swallow the acrid taste in my mouth. “You’d think so. But that’s the thing about death: even if you can see it coming, you’re not really prepared. I spent a lot of that year and a half refusing to believe anything anyone told me. I guess I was hoping that Ziva would beat the odds. I convinced her to keep fighting, to continue chemo because I honestly believed she could recover. I thought I was championing her. But really... I was just in denial.”

“You had hope,” she offers. “I get that. Uri was my hope, you know. I think I slept next to him for the whole first year after Mama and Papa died. When I woke up with nightmares, he’d lift me into his arms and carry me around the room until I could breathe again. Or if I couldn’t go back to sleep, he’d sing to me.”

My jaw drops. “He *sings*?”

Polly chuckles softly. “He’s actually got an amazing voice. He just doesn’t use it very often. I know what you’re thinking: what can’t he do, right?”

“Nothing, it seems,” I mumble distractedly. “Except be vulnerable.” Polly turns her head towards me and I bite my tongue. “I’m sorry; that kinda slipped out.”

She chuckles. “No, it’s okay. You’re totally right. He’s not good at that.”

“Was it always that way?”

“Pretty much. Ever since I can remember, at least. But then again, he was really young, too, when everything happened. He became responsible for the entire family and the entire Bratva in one night.”

I frown. “Can I ask you something, Polly?”

“Sure.”

“Nikolai’s older than Uri, right?”

“Mm. You wanna know why Uri took over and not Nikolai?” She shifts, the sheets scrunching up with her limited motion. “From what I was allowed to see, Nikolai kinda broke down right after my parents died. He locked himself away and refused to participate in anything. So Uri had to step up. He was the one in the hospital looking out for Lev. He was the one at home, taking care of me. He was the one in every Bratva meeting, calling the shots, making decisions. I don’t think he wanted to be *pakhan*—I think it chose him. And by the time Nikolai reappeared, the status quo had been established. Uri just became who he had to be.”

“Oh,” I say softly. It’s a broad strokes story, but I feel like I can sense little gaps in it where the heartbreak shines through. I can just imagine Uri burying his grief first thing each morning as he rose to do what his family needed him to do. Shoving it all somewhere deep inside him so it didn’t reach up from within and strangle him.

I know that feeling.

I’ve *lived* that feeling.

“He doesn’t wear his heart on his sleeve because he’s afraid to lose it, Alyssa. I know he cares about you, but he’s terrified to lose anyone else. Especially someone who’s as important to him as you are.”

A timid shiver runs down my spine. “Uri and I are just...” Well, what *are* we exactly? “Uri and I are nothing.”

Polly raises her eyebrows a fraction. It’s amazing how much I can see now in the darkness. “I’m fourteen, Alyssa. I’m not stupid.”

I smile. “No one could ever accuse you of being stupid, Polly.”

“Do you love my brother?”

I’m glad she can’t see that my cheeks are probably beet red at this point. “That’s a heavy question.”

Polly shrugs. “Look at where we are. I figure it’s the time for heavy questions.”

She may have a point but I still can’t bring myself to say it out loud. Hell, I can’t even say it to myself. “He’s different than what I expected. I care about him—”

“That’s not what I asked.”

“What I feel for him is... complicated,” I say eventually.

It’s not exactly a lie. But it’s not the truth, either. There’s a part of me that feels hate and anger and resentment towards Uri. I’m frustrated and tired of the constant, nauseating back and forth he inflicts on me.

But in the midst of all those negative emotions is the truth of how I feel.

Which is that I *hate* to disappoint him. I *hate* that I’ve let him down by exposing his siblings to danger.

And the only reason I feel that way is because I admire and respect him for the way he takes care of his family. I worry about who’s taking care of him while he’s busy taking care of everyone else. I’m scared that he’s in danger right now and I want more than anything to see him again.

And not just for the child we accidentally made together.

For *myself*, too.

But since facing that truth feels too hard, too terrifying, too shocking... I fall back on my coping mechanism and cling to denial.

“Do you think he’ll come for us?” Polly asks in a strained voice that’s close to tears.

“Polly, you and I both know that he will move mountains for you. In the short time I’ve known your brother, I know that to

be true. You need to believe that.”

“I-I do...” she says softly. “I’m just scared.”

“I know you are. I am, too. But don’t worry,” I assure her, making up my mind right then and there. “I’m here. I’ll protect you.”

“Why would you do that for me?”

For a moment, I’m stumped. It’s not that I don’t have a reason; it’s that I have so many.

It’s because I couldn’t save my own sister.

It’s because life has given me a chance to try again.

It’s because, this time around... I can’t afford to fail.

I won’t.

URI

There are two men in the room with Lev, I signal to Nikolai, two more just outside the room and one in the kitchen.

He nods and starts signing back. *You take the two in the front and I'll—*

I shake my head hard. *Lev will need to see me first. You take the two in the front.*

Nikolai stops short. He considers it for a second and then nods. As much as he may loathe it, he knows when to defer to me. Especially where Lev and Polly are concerned.

I send a message to our men. We have twelve soldiers in total, which means taking down these fuckers will be easy enough. I just need to make sure they're taken by surprise before they can hurt Lev or use him to barter for their lives.

I catch sight of Stepan and Josef in the distance and I signal to them to come towards me. The rest of the men split and move around to the front of the house with Nikolai. I stay just under the window of the room where they're holding Lev. One of the enemy men is busy popping something crunchy and noisy into his mouth.

“You got any more of those?”

“Nah, just finished ‘em.”

“Greedy li'l bastard.”

“Look at the dumbass. He's drooling. Guess he's hungry.”

“You hungry, dumbass?” He dangles a chip in front of Lev’s slumped face.

Never mind. Fuck the plan. Fuck precautions. *I’m gonna tear these assholes to pieces.*

Before Stepan and Josef have even reached me, I launch up and crash through the window with my gun drawn. One pull of my trigger and the first of the two captors drops dead, orange chip dust still coating his lips. The second one has his hand clasped around his holster but he hasn’t had time to draw his firearm.

I can hear the sounds of yelling, screaming, more gunshots. But for right now, the room I’m in has an eerie quiet about it.

I advance closer to the flat-nosed fuck whose eyes keep darting to his dead friend sprawled on the stained tile just a few feet away.

Lev is rocking back and forth, causing the chair to wobble to and fro. “Lev, *brat*,” I say gently without taking my eyes off the soon-to-be-dead man. “It’s all going to be okay. Just stay calm. Breathe.”

I step closer. The flat-nosed man is pure terror now. I can smell his sweat, mingling with the stench of his friend’s oozing blood. He doesn’t move as I get closer and closer. Too frozen with fear.

Pathetic.

Makes things easier, though.

I reach out and grab him by the shoulders. “I’ll make this quick for you,” I rumble. “You don’t deserve it, but I’m going to do it anyway. Lev... look away.”

Then I hug the miserable bastard to me and twist his neck.

POP. Bones crack and he slumps to the floor, lifeless before he’s even all the way down.

With that ugly business finished, I wipe my hands on my pants and turn to Lev, kneeling in front of him so I can start to saw away at his restraints with my pocketknife.

He's not making eye contact. Instead, he's just muttering unintelligibly to himself as he rocks back and forth.

"Lev. Hey, it's me. Your brother. It's Uri."

The muttering gets louder, the rocking gets faster, and if I so much as graze any part of him, he recoils and whimpers.

I wrack my brain to think of a way to calm him down. *What would Alyssa do?* It's infuriating that I would even go there, but it's my first instinct. What *would* she do?

She'd probably give him space at first until he was ready to listen to her. I back away a little, satisfied that the restraints aren't hurting him anymore. He's got a few cuts and scrapes but otherwise, he seems relatively unharmed. Physically, at least.

What I'm worried about is what's going on behind his wild eyes.

"Lev. It's me. Uri. Can you hear me?" The mumbling doesn't stop. "Lev, you're safe now. I've gotten rid of those bad men. We're going home."

"Home?" The rocking slows down.

I scoot a little closer. "Yes, home. You're safe now."

"Alyssa?"

I freeze. "What?"

"Alyssa," he repeats. "I want her."

Fuck me. I'm about to tell him that he'll see Alyssa at home, but I stop myself at the last minute. Even assuming she did listen for once, there's no telling what I'll do when I see her again. The rage that swims up at the mere thought of her is enough to blind me.

"I know, buddy. I know you do. But for right now, we need to get out of here, okay?"

"I want Alyssa home."

"I'll see what I can do, okay?" He's still shifting every few seconds, but he allows me to slice off the rest of his restraints.

“Do you want to take my hand?”

Lev shies away from me. “I want Alyssa.”

I’m losing patience fast and the more I try to control it, the harder it becomes to control. The fact that he keeps asking for the very woman who got him into this mess in the first place isn’t helping matters.

“Lev.” Reluctantly, he turns his sad blue eyes on me. “You trust me, don’t you?” The hesitation is a touch too long for my liking, but in the end, he does nod. “Good. Then take my hand and come with me.”

He does but his hand almost slides right out of mine again because it’s soaked with sweat. I hold onto him tightly and lead him out of the room with my gun at the ready.

Outside, the coast is clear. Nikolai and my men are clustered in the living room. I note a pile of dead enemies in the corner and one last live one quivering on his knees in front of Nikolai.

“Stepan,” I order, “take Lev outside and keep him safe until we’re done in here.”

Lev keeps his head down as Stepan ushers him out of the house. Nikolai turns to me, gesturing to the man on his knees between us. “He’s the ringleader. And he’s refusing to talk.”

I meander around him as I size the guy up. He’s shorter but muscly. His eyes are a dark brown and his hair is a white, spiky blonde.

“You fuckers are getting nothing out of me.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Sounds like a challenge. Josef, Hanz—take him. He’s coming with us.”

He laughs maniacally as my boys pick him up roughly and start pushing him towards the door. “You have *no* idea what’s coming!” he cackles as he’s forced into the back of one of my jeeps. “*No* fucking idea.”

The door closes on him and I turn to Nikolai. “Did you get anything out of him?”

“Only this,” he says, holding up the guy’s phone. “It’s got a touch ID installed, but I was able to force his thumb on there. He’s enabled the automatic deletion feature, though. All these text conversations disappear after an hour.”

“Did you get anything?”

“Nothing. All wiped.”

“Fuck,” I grumble as I run a hand through my hair. “It doesn’t matter. That phone might come in handy at some point. So might he. For now, let’s get Lev home.”

We’re walking down the hill with Lev between us when I notice Alyssa’s car. *What the fuck?* I expressly told her to go back—

I stop short when I realize that her car is missing the side mirror. It’s actually lying on the road a few feet away, broken glass scattered across the asphalt.

“Lev,” I say gently, “go with Stepan and Yevgeny. Nikolai and I will be there soon. You’ll be able to see us from the window, okay? We’re right here.”

Lev looks wary, but he also seems keen to get into a dark, enclosed space, so he reluctantly goes with my *vors*. When he’s been taken care of, Nikolai and I stride quickly towards Alyssa’s vehicle.

“This is not good, Uri. It’s not fucking good.” He strokes his chin. “It’s not possible she would have just... skipped town? Tried to make it look like someone came after her?”

I glare at my brother. “Polly was with her. She’d never have pulled something like this with Pol.”

“Are you sure?”

The odd thing is that I *am* sure. Alyssa may not trust me. She may not even like me very much right now. But she does care about my siblings. She would never purposely hurt Lev or Polly. It’s not the most convenient realization to have when I’m absolutely determined to be furious with her, but I can’t deny that that’s how I feel.

Ping.

I turn to Nikolai. “Was that—”

“The phone,” Nikolai says, looking down at the screen. His eyes fly back and forth. Then he pales. “*Fuck.*”

I grab the phone and read the text message that just came in.

BOSS: *We have the girls. Do what you want with the idiot boy.*

My heart is beating frantically as I dial in the same number the text came from. It takes a couple of rings, but then I hear a deep raspy voice that feels vaguely familiar.

“I thought I told you not to fucking call me on this number.”

That voice. It’s unmistakable.

Boris Sobakin.

I hang up and drop the phone into my pants pocket. “*Fuck!*” I bellow.

“We’ll get them back, Uri,” Nikolai assures me.

But I barely hear him. The only things ringing in my ears right now are my own doubts, my own sense of inadequacy. My own fucking failures.

Because if I can’t keep them safe...

What good am I?

TO BE CONTINUED

*Uri and Alyssa’s story continues in Book 2 of the Bugrov
Bratva duet, MIDNIGHT SANCTUARY.*

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