



Midnight
SANCTUARY

BUGROV BRATVA BOOK TWO

NICOLE FOX

MIDNIGHT SANCTUARY

BUGROV BRATVA

BOOK 2

NICOLE FOX

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Cognac Villain

Cognac Vixen

Viktorov Bratva

Whiskey Poison

Whiskey Pain

Orlov Bratva

Champagne Venom

Champagne Wrath

Uvarov Bratva

Sapphire Scars

Sapphire Tears

Vlasov Bratva

Arrogant Monster

Arrogant Mistake

Zhukova Bratva

Tarnished Tyrant

Tarnished Queen

Stepanov Bratva

Satin Sinner

Satin Princess

Makarova Bratva

Shattered Altar

Shattered Cradle

Solovev Bratva

Ravaged Crown

Ravaged Throne

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Velvet Devil

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Romanoff Bratva

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Andrei

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MIDNIGHT SANCTUARY

BOOK 2 OF THE BUGROV BRATVA DUET

One unexpected mistake.

Two unexpected babies.

Three lives changed forever.

Uri Bugrov caught me trespassing, and suddenly, my life is out of control.

I'm pregnant with his baby—correction, his babies.

I'm also a prisoner of his enemies.

Uri comes to save me, because of course he does.

But my rescue comes with collateral damage.

Because now, Polly is missing.

And even though I'm back under Uri's protection, there are more uncertainties between us than ever.

What happens if we don't save her?

What happens when these babies come?

What happens if this is *all my fault*... and Uri never forgives me?

It's midnight in our story.

But these babies are coming, one way or another.

I just have to pray that we all make it to dawn.

MIDNIGHT SANCTUARY* is Book 2 in the Bugrov Bratva duet. Uri and Alyssa's story begins in Book 1, *MIDNIGHT

PURGATORY.

ALYSSA

It takes me a long time before I realize that I'm still alive.

It's easy to forget a thing like that in a place like this, wherever "this" is. It's mostly dark, mostly cool, mostly damp. I stare at the ceiling and sink into the lumpy mattress beneath me and let my brain go completely numb. There's no difference between eyes open and eyes closed. It's all just a blur of the same nothingness.

The first sound to break the silence is my stomach roiling. It jars me from my half-dead trance. It's been a while since I ate anything. Hours, maybe, although I couldn't tell you for the life of me how long "an hour" is anymore.

The second sound to break the silence is a sob from the corner. Then, like someone turned on a faucet in my head, all the memories come rushing back.

The broken shards of mirror on the ground.

Rough hands grabbing me, pulling me, twisting me, hurting me.

The sharp tang of chloroform pressed to my nose as I thrashed and thrashed until thrashing didn't help me anymore.

Polly is the one who's sobbing.

"Hey," I croak, as calmly as I can, although my voice hurts from disuse and the lingering sting of the chloroform. "Are you okay?"

“I have a bad feeling, Alyssa,” she says, her voice chock full of panic. “I have such a bad feeling... It’s like something is sitting on my chest. I-I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe.”

I shove myself up on my elbows. “Pol,” I say sharply, “I need you to close your eyes for me. You might be having a panic attack. I’m gonna talk you through it but I need you to trust me. And I need you to listen to me. Can you do that?”

I’ve had my fair share of panic attacks. When Ziva was diagnosed—*panic*. When Ziva was buried—*panic*. The day we were both supposed to turn eighteen, the first time in my life I ever had a birthday party to myself... *my God*, the panic.

It wasn’t *our* birthday anymore.

It was just mine.

“Are you closing your eyes?”

“Mhmm.”

“Think of open skies and green grass and acres and acres of space.” As I talk, I close my eyes, too, and try to picture the same. “Imagine birds flying through the skies and leaves rustling in the wind. Imagine the smell of freshly-cut grass and blooming flowers.”

“I-I can’t...”

“Shhh,” I say gently. “Keep your eyes closed. Take a deep breath.”

While I counsel her, I look around, trying to notice something, anything, that might help us get out of here. From what I can see as my eyes adjust to the gloom, there are windows, but they’ve been boarded shut. It’s hard to see everything, though, because my wrists have been cuffed to the rusted metal bedframe and that frame itself has been bolted to the floor. It looks like Polina is locked in the same setup. Wriggling does nothing—the metal holds tight.

“A-Alyssa?”

“Sorry,” I murmur. “Just keep breathing, Polly. Deep, steady breaths. You can do this. I’m here.”

I'm not sure if she's buying my confidence. Honestly, I'm having a hard time buying it myself. But blind hope is all we've got at this point. From a totally objective perspective, I'd say it looks like we're well and truly fucked.

It's ironic how situational perception can be. I'd give anything to be back in Uri's basement again, as long it meant I was far from this absolute shithole.

"How're you feeling now? Is it easier to breathe?"

"A little." Polly's voice is still drenched with fear but at least she sounds a bit calmer. "But I'm still scared..."

"Polly, listen to me. They've kept us alive for a reason."

"What if the reason is worse than keeping us alive?"

I have to repeat that sentence in my head before it starts making sense to me. "We're going to get out of here, Polly."

She sucks in a breath when we hear a bolt unlatch somewhere. It sounds eerily close. The hairs on my arms and legs stand on end as I catch the sound of footsteps and voices.

Someone's coming.

"Alyssa."

"Stay calm and don't say anything, Polly. We don't want to—"

I break off when I see light in the far corner. My eyes go wide when I realize that there are cell bars separating us from the staircase. We weren't really in a room at all.

The light illuminates two silhouettes making their way down the staircase. Both sharp and terrifying, but when they reach the bottom landing, they take shape. The first man is large and burly. The second is short and lean. One flips a switch and suddenly, I'm cringing back, trying to protect my eyes from the assault of light.

"Are the pretty little birds hungry?" the burly one croons in a deep, rasping voice that matches his physique. I blink through the sting in my eyes. He's got a nasty scar running across his face and a nastier smile plastered across his chapped lips.

“You motherfuckers!” I’m completely taken aback by Polly’s sudden scream. “Let us go! Let us go now or you *will* be sorry. My brothers will make sure of that!”

“Polly,” I gasp, trying to catch her eye. “Poll—”

“Let us out of this shithole!”

“Well, I’ll be damned,” the short one cackles, his eyes fixed on Polly as he runs a hand over his tattoo sleeve. “The little kitten has claws.”

The burly one chuckles. It sounds like a cement mixer backfiring. “All she’s got is a mouth on her. She may spit and hiss, but it’s just noise at the end of the day.”

“Fuckers!” Polly screeches, pulling at her restraints so hard that I can see the red welt they’ve left around her wrists. “*FUCKERS!*”

Scarface narrows his eyes at Polly as he moves away from the cell door. “You know what? I was supposed to open the door and make sure the two of you were fed. But now...?” He flings the thinly-wrapped sandwiches through the bars of the cell. They land on the floor, far out of reach. “Well, we can call that ‘feeding time.’ Close enough, right?”

Tattoo Arm laughs and flings the plastic bottles of water through the cell bars as well. “You can fill your bellies if you can reach the goodies. Fair is fair, eh?”

Tears streak Polly’s face and shine in the light from the stairwell. I do my best to meet her gaze but she’s not looking at me. “You’re going to regret this! Both of you.”

“*Polly!*”

RING-RING. RING-RING.

At least the ringtone seems to succeed in shutting Polly up. Her mouth clamps closed as Scarface pulls out his phone and answers it in a totally different voice. It’s deeper and hoarser and far more respectful.

But his tone is the only thing I can really decipher, because I can’t understand a word he’s saying. I recognize the harsh cadence of Russian, but it’s gibberish to me. The conversation

lasts several minutes and the whole time, Tattoo Arm just stands there, listening intently.

Based on their body language alone, I'm guessing whoever is calling is the boss.

The phone call finally ends and both men's expressions look markedly different as they glance at each other and then march up the stairs. I'm grateful at least that they've been successfully distracted from Polly. I was terrified that, if she kept screaming, they'd come in here and...

I don't bother finishing that thought. Why obsess over nightmares that haven't happened yet? We've got plenty of in-progress ones to worry about.

I take stock of the situation. They left our food and water scattered out of reach, but at least they left. Added bonus—they kept the lights on.

I take a good look around the dingy cell. Come to think of it, I might've preferred the lights left off, actually. At least if it were dark, I wouldn't have to see the mysterious stains or the cockroaches skittering in the corners.

Slowly, my eyes veer to Polly. "Are you—"

I break off when I see her face. Her eyes are wide, her jaw open slightly, and her face has completely drained of color. Seeing her like that is a lightning bolt to the chest.

"Polly! Are you okay? What's going on?"

She blinks and a tear falls. One lone tear that somehow feels so much worse than if she were bawling.

"I... I can speak Russian, Alyssa. I understood everything he just said."

My heart drops. She understood their conversation and *that's* her reaction? It can't be good news.

She turns to me, pale and trembling. "They've got an auction set up. They're going to sell me to the highest bidder."

URI

I shove the *mudak* down the stairs.

He falls cartoonishly, cracking his head half a dozen times before he eats the step at the bottom of the staircase. I follow him down, snatch him up again by the scruff of his collar, and hoist him back onto his feet.

His eyes wheel wildly in their sockets. He's almost certainly concussed, damn near delirious with pain and terror. A nicer man would give him a moment of mercy.

I'm not a nicer man.

Instead, I push him roughly towards the shed in the far corner of the lawn behind the greenhouse. To a passing observer, it looks like any other shed in any other neighborhood in the world. You'd expect to open it and find rakes, lawn mowers, fertilizer. And if you stepped inside, that's exactly what you'd find.

But you'd also find a trapdoor. And beneath that trapdoor, you'd find a staircase. At the bottom of that staircase, you'd find a room sealed with concrete thick enough to keep screams from leaking out.

And in that room, you'd see terrible things happening.

I kick the motherfucker into the shed, down the stairs, and into the concrete room. He's shivering at the sudden drop in temperature. It doesn't take him long to realize that there are no windows and no doors other than the one I just hurled him through.

Unfortunately for him, I'm standing between him and it.

I lean against the door frame and cross my hands over my chest. "I suggest you make the decision to answer me truthfully now. It'll save you a world of pain later."

The man's eyes bulge as he scrambles on all fours to the far corner of the concrete cell. He's scrawny, badly bearded, pale, and shifty-looking. His voice, when he speaks, matches his appearance perfectly. "Where am I?"

"You want answers? You'll have to answer mine first. Let's start with an easy one: what's your name?"

His throat bobs. "Alan."

Generic, useless, and entirely forgettable. Hm. I ask my next question in Russian, but I'm not even halfway through it before I can tell by his frown that he has no idea what the fuck I'm saying.

That one throws me for a loop. Sobakin wouldn't hire just anyone for something of this magnitude. He'd want an insider. Someone who knows our world.

"I asked how long you've worked for Boris Sobakin."

His throat bobs again, but this time, there's an odd hitch in it. A tell, I think. "Who?"

I uncross my arms and take a slow step towards him. "I thought I warned you about lying to me."

As soon as I move closer, Alan plasters himself to the wall like he thinks he can teleport right through it. "N-no! Please! Don't."

"Okay, I won't," I agree amicably.

He drops his hands, mostly in shock, so I take the opportunity to punch him in the gut as hard as I can. He coughs up blood, spluttering desperately as he sucks in big breaths. I retreat so he doesn't vomit all over my shoes.

"If you're going to lie," I growl, "then I am, too."

He's still keeled over when he looks up at me warily. "F-fine," he stammers. He sucks in another dramatic breath and spits out

a little more blood before he straightens. “I know Boris.”

“I’m aware. My question was, how long have you worked for him?”

He shakes his head in pained confusion. “Not long. Few weeks, maybe. That’s it.”

“What did I just say about lying?”

“Listen, man, he stumbled across *me*, okay? I was just running my operation, doing small-time jobs, enough to pay my men and myself. I’m not a big-timer.”

I snort. *Clearly*. “But you caught Sobakin’s notice.”

“Because my men and I happened to be in there already when he showed up.”

“In *where* already?”

He gulps, his eyes fixed worriedly on my face. “Th-the girl’s house. The one next to yours.”

“What were you doing in there?”

Another gulp. “I was just... just looking through the place. Everyone’s gotta eat, ya know?”

“You were robbing her house?”

“My men and I go through nice neighborhoods and watch for a while. We know which houses have the dogs, which houses have security systems, which houses have old white women with more money than they can spend in their lifetime. We’d been in your neighborhood for a few days before I realized that the girl’s place was empty. No one was coming or going.”

I step forward and he presses himself hard against the wall. When he’s sure I’m not going to throw another punch, he continues. “We were in the middle of the ransack when these scary motherfuckers walk in. I thought we were dead men. Turns out—they wanna join forces.”

More like they wanted a fall guy.

“Did you meet with Boris?”

“Nah. Didn’t even know his name until recently. I only ever spoke to him over the phone. Which was fine with me. Guy was scary enough as it was.”

“What was the deal?”

“Wait and watch,” he rasps. “If one of three people appeared from behind your walls, I was to catch them, bring them to the safehouse, and keep them there.”

My jaw clenches tight but I nod for him to continue. “Who were the three people?”

“The idiot and the two girls.”

I grab him by the throat so fast that he doesn’t see it coming. He splutters hard, flecks of blood spraying my face. I’m so tempted to take his life immediately.

But I can’t afford to let my emotions get the better of me. I loosen my grip just enough so that he can breathe, but not so much that he forgets who I am or what I’m capable of.

“If you ever refer to my brother like that again, I will cut your tongue out and feed it to you. Is that understood?”

I deliver the threat with the kind of unblinking coldness that promises I will see it through. Alan’s eyes go wide as he nods quickly. Only then do I release him. He hacks up a few throaty coughs before he finally subsides into silence.

“Tell me what happened next.”

He shrinks away from my voice. “Uh, well... things didn’t quite work out. We got the... the boy. But we didn’t manage to get the girl. I called Sobakin and he told me that we could use the boy as bait. To distract you.”

My hands clench into fists. “He wanted the girls all along.”

Alan nods. “I don’t know why, but they were his main target. We were left in charge of the boy, though. Sobakin said he’d take care of the rest.”

My gun is burning a hole in the waistband of my pants. Now that I’ve got everything I wanted out of this rodent, I’m itching

to put a bullet in his brain. My hand twitches towards my gun but—

“Uri.” I turn to find Nikolai standing on the lowest step of the stairs. “Can I have a moment?”

I walk towards him, leaving Alan as a quivering puddle in the far corner. “What?”

“Did he give you what you wanted?” Nikolai murmurs.

“He cracked immediately. Which is no surprise. That piece of shit is not Bratva. He’s a low-rent, smash-and-grab moron whom Boris decided to exploit in order to get the job done. He was after Polina and Alyssa this entire time. Lev was just meant to be bait.”

Nikolai’s jaw tightens and his blue eyes flick past me to glance at Alan. “I know you want to kill him—”

“Insightful observation, brother.”

“—but he’s given you good information and he might cough up more. Does he know that the girls have been taken?”

“He claims to have been in charge of Lev only. If he’s telling the truth, then I don’t see how he could know about the girls. They were taken seconds after we attacked him and his men.”

Nikolai nods. “We’ll keep him down here. He could come in handy later.”

I consider that for a few seconds. The bloodlust is coursing through my body right now. For everything he’s put Lev through, for what he’s cost me, this *mudak* deserves to die. But Nikolai’s solemn scowl is reminding me that I have to play the long game here. I have to think five steps ahead of Sobakin, not just lash out blindly.

“Fine. I’ll let him live. For now.”

Nikolai sighs and mounts the stairs, disappearing overhead. I face Alan again. “Your honesty has earned you your life,” I tell him. “Remember that in the future.”

He raises his blood-smeared chin from his chest. “Y-you’re gonna leave me here?”

“My mercy doesn’t extend as far as giving you back your freedom,” I snarl. “You’re lucky you’re still drawing breath at all.”

And if I’m lucky... Alyssa and Polly are still breathing, too.

ALYSSA

The days have started blending together. I thought the darkness was bad, but the constant semi-light might be worse. The buzzing of fluorescents has taken up permanent residence inside my skull.

When I do sleep, I wake up suddenly in cold sweats. Sometimes with nightmares that feel like they're bleeding into real life. Sometimes with thoughts that feel like nightmares.

I try not to show Polly my panic. I'm not sure she'd notice even if I did, because she withdraws into herself more and more with each passing hour. The more silent she becomes, the more I worry.

She hasn't said anything in a long time now. Her eyes mostly stay closed but they flutter open every now and again. I wish I could say something, but it's as hard to speak as it is to do anything else. I'm so dehydrated that I want to swallow my own tongue at this point.

The worst part has been watching the rats come out of the woodwork. Polly and I were forced to watch as they ate through the thin cellophane wrappings of our sandwiches first before devouring the sandwiches themselves. The only thing they left were the two bottles of water lying on the floor.

The two Russians haven't come back. If it weren't for the tiny cameras I'd spotted in the far corner of the room, I'd say we were completely forgotten.

"Polly?"

The rasp of my own voice hurts, but when Polly twitches and cringes at the sound of it, I realize I should've spoken up sooner. How can I expect a fourteen-year-old to withstand this kind of trauma if I can't?

Be strong, Alyssa. Be strong for Polly and your baby.

"Polly," I try again when she doesn't respond.

Her head lolls to the side and she peels her eyelids open like it hurts her to make the effort. I take one look at those big hazel eyes and offer her a half-smile. "I know this might seem like a stupid question but... how are you?"

Polly gives me an incremental shrug. "I don't know anymore. You?"

My head is pounding but I speak through the ache. *I wish they'd just turn off the fucking lights.* "I'm fine. It's not like I haven't been locked in a basement against my will before."

That actually earns me a smile. "True. This is nothing for you." But as quick as it came, the little sliver of brightness in Polly's eyes vanishes. "I'm sorry, by the way."

"Why are you sorry?"

"For everything you've been through because of my family. None of this would have happened if Uri hadn't locked you down there."

A tear slips down her cheek, not that we can afford to waste the hydration. "Polly, listen to me: the only ones to blame are the motherfuckers who put us down here. But trust me, we're gonna get out."

"How can you know that?"

"Because I know your brother. Have you ever known him to give up? Especially when it comes to you and Lev?"

Polly looks too tired to sum up the slightest bit of positivity. Her eyes are blank and dead. I can't let her sink any lower or I might lose her completely.

"I need you to stay positive. I know it's hard while we're trapped down here, chained to these beds with no food and

water. But I need you to try anyway.”

“I don’t think I can.”

There’s a whimper in her voice and I’m reminded again that she’s only fourteen years old. All I want to do is draw her into my arms and hold her until she starts feeling better. But since I can’t comfort her the way I want to, I decide to give her the one thing in my possession that I think might make a difference.

“You *have* to. You have to believe we can survive this. You have to believe we’re going to be okay. My baby’s going to need their cool aunt around, after all.”

Her eyes snap to mine. “W-what did you say?”

I give her a small smile. “You’re the first person I’ve told.”

“You’re pregnant,” she whispers. She glances at my belly. “You’re *pregnant*.”

I glance at the cameras, mostly to remind her to be quiet. “Yes, I am,” I whisper back. “I have been for a while now.”

“How long is a while?”

“Ten weeks, give or take.”

There it is—the little flicker of life I was hoping for. The brightness comes back, the dullness recedes, and Polly straightens just a little bit taller. “I... I can’t believe it.”

“Trust me—I couldn’t either at first.”

She’s looking more like herself now. The arch of her eyebrows has that old streak of mischievousness. “Does he know?”

“No. I was serious: you’re the first person I’ve told.”

“That was your trump card, huh?”

“Depends. Did it work?”

She nods slowly. “I’m going to be an aunt.”

“Being an aunt requires both of us to get out of here in one piece,” I remind her. “We’re made of stronger stuff than they think we are, Polly. We can fight them. We can get out of here. I will have this baby and you’re going to be the best aunt.”

She's looking a little teary-eyed again, but I'm pretty sure these are the good kind of tears. "Thanks for sharing with me."

"Of course."

"Can I ask you something?" When I nod, she asks, "Why haven't you told Uri yet?"

I hesitate. If there was ever a time for honesty, though, it's right now. "For the first few days after I suspected that I might be pregnant, I was in denial. Then, when it became obvious, I was scared to tell him. Things with Uri and me are... complicated. I wasn't even sure he'd be happy. And to be honest, deep down, I knew I wanted this baby."

"Uri will be happy, too, you know. He just might not know it right away."

I snort with laughter. "That's comforting."

"But seriously," Polly says, adjusting her position on the mattress, "he's going to be a great father."

I nod. "I already know that."

Polly smiles. "And you're going to be a fantastic mother."

It's the first time I've heard that word used out loud in relation to me. *Mother*. It sounds so important. So heavy. "I don't know about that."

"Are you kidding me? You're so amazing with Lev. You bonded with him in days when I didn't manage to in years. That comes from a natural mothering instinct."

"Polly—"

Before I can finish my sentence, we hear the bolt unlatch. Polly's eyes go wide with panic and the color drains from her face.

"A-are they coming for me?" she gasps.

My instinct is to jump out of bed and shield her with my body. But these *fucking* restraints. Every time I pull at them, the sting of my raw, bloody skin makes me regret it.

“Hey now,” I tell her urgently. “It’s gonna be okay. You’re stronger than they think, Polina Bugrov. You’re as Bratva as your older brothers. You’ll survive this. Remember who you are.”

I’m not sure if the words are getting through to her. Her eyes are fixed on the same two Russians who came the first time. Tattoo Arm licks his lips when he sees me and flings a plastic package onto my bed. I don’t bother examining it just yet—I’m concentrating on Scarface, who’s making a beeline for Polly’s mattress.

Oh, God. They are here for her.

“No!” she screams, realizing the same thing. “No, please! NO!”

Scarface says something in Russian with a deep, throaty chuckle. He undoes Polly’s restraints and hoists her into his arms. She looks like a little ragdoll against his muscular chest.

My sense of calm breaks. “Please. Don’t take her. Take me instead. TAKE ME INSTEAD!”

Both men look at me with amusement. “We would, gladly,” Tattoo Arm says with another lip lick. “But the boss has other plans for you.”

They turn back to each other and continue talking in Russian. I can’t understand anything they’re saying. Over the sounds of Polly’s frantic screams, I can’t really hear much at all. But I do catch a name amidst the strange, slurring words.

Dominik.

“Polly,” I yell as they lock the cell door and take her up the stairs. “Remember what I told you. Remember who you are!”

The door slams shut. The bolt latches again. Polly’s screams are cut off abruptly.

I’m completely alone now.

It feels like madness.

URI

“This will work.”

But my confidence is born out of desperation rather than determination and Nikolai knows that. He eyes me carefully, pushing the cup of black coffee towards me. “It will work as long as he complies,” he replies. “If he chooses to fuck us over —”

“He won’t.”

“You overestimate how much people fear death, Uri. If I were that rat down in the cellar, I’d know I was dead already. Regardless of how cooperative I decided to be.”

I grit my teeth. “You underestimate how much people fear pain. He knows that I will rain hell down on him if he doesn’t do what I want. Trust me—he will cooperate.”

Nikolai sighs and nods. “Shall we then?”

I extend my hand out and Nikolai drops Alan’s phone into my palm. We’re heading back to the shed as sunlight peeps around the corners of the house. Has it only been a night? It feels like twenty. I’m aging decades with every passing hour.

“Sir?”

I turn around to find Svetlana standing on the landing of the staircase. I can see it in her eyes: this is about Lev. “How is he?”

“He’s had nightmares all night, sir,” she says wearily. The dark circles under her eyes are proof enough of that. “George and I

tried to calm him, but he just keeps asking for you. And...”

I frown. “And?”

“And for Miss Alyssa, as well.”

I don’t even have to glance at Nikolai to see that he’s burning a hole in my face with his stare. I want to go up there and be with Lev, but right now, I have to focus on getting Polina and Alyssa back.

“Try to soothe him. If he starts losing it again, give him a sedative.” It’s not my favorite way to deal with Lev’s episodes. He’s always confused and scared when he wakes up. *But desperate times...*

“Yes, sir.”

Svetlana disappears into the corridor and I resume my warpath, hellbent on making this plan work. Nikolai follows behind me without a word but I can practically hear the wheels in his head spinning.

I crack when we get to the shed. “Stop it.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“I can *hear* you thinking at me.”

Nikolai purses his lips. “Don’t project your own guilt back at me, brother. I’m just your muscle.”

He’s right—I *am* projecting. With a grimace, I open the trapdoor and descend. My footsteps echo against the cement walls as we go lower, the temperature chilling faster and faster with every step.

Alan is lying on the thin mattress against the wall when I appear. He scampers upright when he sees us. “Are you letting me go?”

My snort comes out through the nose. “You’re either stupid or delusional if you thought that would ever happen.”

He deflates instantly, leaning against the wall. “What then?”

“I’m not letting you go unless you earn your freedom.”

“I don’t have any more information, I swear. I told you—”

I hold up a hand and he shuts up instantly. “All you have to do is play along.”

“Play along?” Alan repeats. “I don’t understand.”

I roll my eyes and turn my back on him so that I can talk to my brother. “Are the men on standby?”

“I just got a call from Stepan. They’re ready. I’ve got everything set up upstairs in the shed. Now, all we need is to keep him talking long enough.” Nikolai’s gaze veers past me towards our captive. “You really think he’s up for the job?”

“He’ll find a way.”

The skepticism in Nikolai’s eyes is far from subtle. “I’ll be upstairs.”

“How long do you need?” I ask as he makes his way to the stairs.

“Not long. Thirty seconds should do it. But the longer you keep him on the line, the better.”

“Got it,” I say with a nod as I wave him away. Then I turn to Alan where he’s cowering against the far wall of the cell. “Now—let’s talk.”

Alan’s lips have gone an unappealing shade of gray. He looks barely human, with those sunken-in cheeks and milky-white irises.

I fling a bag at him. He catches it out of mid-air and eyes it cautiously until he catches the scent. Then, realizing what it is, he tears into it like a wild animal, stuffing the burger down his throat in huge chunks.

He finishes the food in four bites and then downs the bottle of water I roll toward him. After he’s done, he starts licking the brown paper the burger was wrapped in. “You got another one?” he asks between slurps.

“I might. Would you like that?”

“Yes!” he cries out, stumbling forward and dropping the burger wrapping. “Tell me. I’ll do anything.”

“Like I said, all you have to do is play along.” I pull out his phone. “I’m going to send a text message to your boss.”

“He’s not my—”

He stops short when he catches the expression on my face. I’m confident he won’t interrupt me again. “I’m going to send a text message to your boss, and then I can guarantee he’s going to call right afterwards. You’re going to pick up and have a conversation with him. Keep him on the phone as long as possible. Be believable. He can’t know that you’re here with me.”

Despite the cold room, Alan’s forehead is suddenly tainted with beads of sickly sweat. “I... O-okay. I can do that.”

I take a step forward. “Let me be very clear: if you give anything away, whether by accident or intention, you’re a dead man.”

Alan nods. “I understand.”

“Good.” I open his phone and pull up the text message thread. I take a deep breath, then press send on the fake messages that Nikolai and I crafted.

ALAN: the boy got out. we’re combing the area but it looks like he’s long gone.

ALAN: call me back ASAP and lemme know what you want me to do

I can’t tear my eyes away from the phone once the messages have gone through. I’m guessing that Sobakin has his phone on him at all times, so it shouldn’t—

READ: 11:47 A.M.

Instantly, my whole world coalesces down to one word. *Call. Call. Call, you motherfucker.* I can hear Alan’s uneasy rustling next to me. My breath plumes in the chill air in clouds of white. *Call. Call. Call, you—*

The phone starts to vibrate.

“You’re up,” I tell Alan. “I’m putting you on speakerphone. Make sure you play your part.”

He nods so hard that the sweat flies off his forehead. Scowling with disgust, I hit *Accept*.

“How the fuck did you lose the boy?” It’s definitely Sobakin on the line. His deep voice is unmistakable. “He’s a mental case.”

My hand tightens around the phone. Even Alan looks at me with wide eyes and takes a step back as though he’s worried I’m gonna blow up and he’ll be caught in the line of fire.

“I dunno, boss. Some of my men... they’re idiots.”

“All your men are idiots,” he growls. “It doesn’t matter. I got what I wanted. The boy doesn’t matter anymore.”

“B-but... he might go back to—”

“Let him,” Sobakin snarls with a dark laugh. “By the time he gets to his brother, it’ll be too late.”

He hangs up a second later and I feel my blood boil with fury. What the hell did that mean? *It’ll be too late*. Too late for what? Too late for whom?

“I-I did what you asked,” Alan whines shrilly. “I played my part. W-will you let me go now?”

My eyes connect with his. He shrinks back. Part of him must know what’s coming, even if some little shred is still holding out hope that he’ll survive this ordeal.

But it doesn’t take long to dispel him of that notion. I lunge forward and grab him. I beat the shit out of him until my fists ache from the effort. He screams and begs for mercy the whole time. But until my knuckles are coated in blood and he’s well and truly unconscious, I don’t stop.

It doesn’t seem to matter. Beating this useless *mudak* to a pulp gives me no relief, no satisfaction. It doesn’t save anyone. Not Alyssa, not Polina. Not my own cursed soul.

All I feel is a gaping emptiness that gets larger with every passing second.

When I’ve had enough, I lock the cell and return upstairs where Nikolai is sitting at the makeshift table with his laptop

in front of him.

“Well? Did you get his location?”

“Yeah, I got it.” He turns to me and stops short when he sees the blood on my hands. “Is everything okay?”

“No,” I growl as Sobakin’s words repeat over and over again in my head. “But it will be.”

ALYSSA

I thought things were bad before. That was nothing compared to the hours after Polly was taken.

I underestimated the warmth she brought in this cold cell. I underestimated how much seeing her next to me gave me strength and purpose. When she was here, I had a reason to be calm and focused. To project confidence until it almost felt real.

But now?

Everything just feels fucked.

My hope dwindles faster with every passing second. Even after I finish the contents of the plastic bag of food that those Russian assholes left me, I can't bring myself to feel anything more than fear.

None of it is for me, though. Every time I close my eyes, I see Polly. Alone and shivering, marooned up on an endless stage with a horde of leering men standing around, licking their lips, wondering how much it will cost to get their hands on her. I struggle against the restraints again and again, even though they've proven they aren't going anywhere and my wrists are basically one giant, pulsing, bloody nerve ending.

I have to get out of here somehow.

I have to save Polly.

I promised her I'd protect her. How can I ever look her in the face again if I don't? The thought that follows is even worse: *what if I don't even get the chance to ever look her in the face*

again? A low, guttural sob escapes my throat and I start struggling all over again, thrashing and moaning uselessly.

“Now, now. Let’s calm down, little lamb.”

I freeze mid-struggle. I’m not so far gone that I don’t realize that this voice is new. It’s deep and silky smooth, a voice I mistrust instantly. I peek to the side and catch sight of him.

He’s a tall man, though not as tall as Uri. His broad shoulders are covered in a silk shirt left unbuttoned to mid-chest, revealing an eerily hairless torso. He’s smiling, but it makes my skin crawl, a fact made worse by the unsettling patch of burnt skin swallowing the right side of his face.

I draw in a breath as he moves closer to my bed. “You’re Sobakin?”

He places a hand to his chest. He’s wearing a collection of huge, chunky rings. “Please, call me Boris. You must be the Alyssa I’ve heard so much about.”

He wears an air of sophistication about him. It makes you believe that he could be a civilized man. But I’ve been down here long enough to see through the façade. No civilized man would lock women up in a basement like this. No civilized man would sell off a child into sex slavery. He can be as smooth as he wants—I’m onto the motherfucker.

“Where’s Polly?” I demand, pulling my foot away from him.

“Not here.”

I keep pulling at my restraints. “She’s a child. Don’t do this. Let her go.”

His smile just gets wider. “You’re attached to the girl. That’s precious. But unfortunately, it’s too late to change her fate now.”

He makes it sound inevitable. It’s the same way the doctors and my parents made me feel about Ziva’s diagnosis. I didn’t believe them then. And I’m not going to believe this creep now. I’ll take blind hope over cold acceptance any day.

“Take me instead. I’ll take her place.”

Boris raises his eyebrows. “That’s brave of you—but entirely unhelpful. The men at this particular auction prefer their purchases *young*.”

I cringe, my stomach twisting in disgust. I have to bite down on my tongue to keep the bile from rising. “You bastard,” I hiss.

“Ooh, I do admire the spirit. I would have thought you’d be much closer to broken at this point. Most other women are.”

I’m already cold, but my skin feels a few degrees colder ever since he entered. He’s done this before. No wonder this cell, the beds, the restraints—all of it feels so worn. The air itself is cobwebby. Like the ghosts and screams of all the women who preceded me here are still lingering between the walls.

“In any case, I would stop thinking about the girl and start thinking about yourself. I have plans for you, too. But don’t worry—I intend to make sure you enjoy yourself.”

I don’t want to give him the satisfaction of my horror, but when his hand grazes my cheek, I can’t stop the instinct any longer. I start retching instantly. Boris jumps out of the way like a startled cat.

“Disgusting,” he mutters. That silky smoothness disappears altogether. Now, he just sounds *pissed*.

Despite the sandwich I ate, nothing comes out of me but a few trickles of spit and blood. I collapse onto the mattress, my whole body wracked with shivers. I don’t give myself much time to wallow before I look at him, determined to fight as hard as I can if he so much as takes another step towards me.

Boris is still standing at the foot of the bed, far enough away to avoid the splatter of my vomit. Those brown-gold eyes of his are narrowed with distaste. “Are you going to be difficult about this?” I open my mouth but he holds up a hand. “Don’t bother answering. I’m not prepared to wait for you to decide one way or the other.”

As I watch, he pulls something out of his pants pocket. It takes me a moment to focus on the instrument he’s holding up to the light.

Is that a... *syringe*?

“No!” I gasp, pulling my knees up toward my chest as high as they can go. “No, no, *no*.”

He strides around the bed as I start struggling again but the restraints are making it impossible for me to do much. I see his hand rise toward my neck. “*NO!*”

But it’s too late. I feel the sharp pinch as the needle breaks the skin. Almost immediately, my head starts to spin and my vision goes blurry. It’s like black snowflakes falling over my eyes. The world fades, one pixel at a time, until there’s nothing left but darkness.

I can still feel, though, at least for a while. Boris’s hands undo the buttons of my blouse one by one. The cold sneaks in to nip at me like little rats.

Then he stops.

“Well, well, well... is that what I think it is?” He clucks his teeth. “You’re pregnant.”

Even if I could talk, I don’t know what I would say. Lie? Don’t? Would it matter? Would he care?

“Uri Bugrov’s woman *and* his baby. I really have hit the jackpot, haven’t I?”

I wish I could see. Or move. Or do anything but sit here behind this veil of darkness and listen to the most monstrous beast I’ve ever encountered murmur under his breath about my baby.

And then...

Wish granted.

I hear a huge bang. Like the world being ripped apart at the seams. I smell smoke and debris and Boris’s surprised intake of air. Then another huge explosion and the keening wail of a bullet.

Screams. Thumps. Splintering wood and billowing smoke. It’s all happening just on the other side of this drug-fueled shadow.

I don't know who the hell is coming—someone worse?—until a familiar scent hits my nostrils.

Scotch and cinnamon.

It's Uri.

Never have I been more relieved, more grateful, more overjoyed to see someone—well, to figuratively see him—in my entire life.

“I warned you about touching my woman, Boris. I wasn't joking.”

“I was just—”

I'll never find out what Boris was just about to do, because before he can finish his thought, I hear the swish of Uri storming across the room and the violent crunch of fist meeting flesh. It rings out a dozen times or more, accompanied each time by a grunt or scream from Boris, until he isn't making any noise at all anymore.

One more bang. The final bang.

Then... silence.

I feel Uri's fingers stroke my face. “I... I can't s-s-see...” I try to say. I'm not sure if my lips move or not.

“It's okay. Hush now. You're safe.”

Hearing those words, feeling his arms around me, breathing in that deep, oaky scent of his—it's all too much. I try prying open my mouth to thank him and only a big, ugly sob comes out. I shouldn't be feeling so much relief right now. Not when Polly's still gone. Not when she's in imminent danger.

I need to tell him. He'll go back to hating me, but I have to tell him. Except, every time I open my mouth, another sob comes out.

“It's okay,” Uri tells me. “You're safe now, Alyssa. I've got you. I've got you.” He tucks me close into his embrace. “It's going to be okay now.”

Then he bends his lips to mine and kisses me. It's the lightest of kisses, so soft that it might as well be a dream. I'm Sleeping

Beauty in this one and he's my prince—but this is no fairy tale. Because even though his kiss brings me back to life just enough to make out the hazy, blurry outline of his frame silhouetted against the light spilling through the door, the things I have to say to him are terrible.

“Polly,” I whisper.

Uri stiffens instantly, his eyes growing wary. “What about her?”

“Sh-she's gone.”

URI

I let my relief get the better of me.

Seeing that I arrived just in time to stop Alyssa from being violated by that lecherous *mudak*... it made me lose my head. It made me touch her and look at her and hold her in a way that I had vowed never to do again.

And that kiss...

Big mistake.

Especially because now, I can feel it on my lips as I pace the house wildly, trying to figure out where the hell my sister is.

“Well?” I demand every time I pass one of my men in the corridors.

“No sign of her, sir.”

“This room is clear, sir.”

“The house is empty, sir.”

I’m ready to blow the whole place up, Boris right along with it. The only reason I don’t is because he’s the key to finding out where Polly is.

The basement door bangs open and Nikolai appears with Alyssa in his arms. She’s got a blanket wrapped around her body. I had the forethought to cover her up a little before my men appeared. But after that, I’d gotten as far away from her as possible. Her eyes roll strangely as Nikolai coaxes her towards the front door of the safehouse. She keeps fading in

and out of consciousness, murmuring, mumbling, and twitching sleepily.

“Uri.”

I turn to my brother reluctantly. “We’ve got to get her back home so we can flush her system. The motherfucker drugged her.”

I flinch away from looking at her. Despite how pissed off I am right now, I feel the possessive beast inside me rear his head. *She should be in my arms right now, it’s roaring. Not his. Mine.*

“Get her back home. Send her with Stepan and Josef. I have to find Polly.”

“Boris is down there?”

I nod. “And he’s gonna cough up some answers.” Then I blow past my brother and head back down to the cellar.

Boris is still deeply unconscious when I reach the bottom of the staircase. I kick him with my boot and he falls onto his back. “Hanz! Dmitri!” I roar back up. “Bring me water.”

A few moments later, Hanz appears with a bucket filled to the brim. I grab it and pour the whole thing right onto Boris’s face. He splutters desperately, his mouth opening and closing like a goldfish.

I pass the empty bucket back to Hanz and squat down so that I’m at eye level with Boris. When I see that he’s awake now, I pull my gun out and place the nozzle directly on his forehead. “Talk.”

He blinks, his eyes crossing as they land on the gun between his eyes. When he finally pieces together what’s happening, his beaten-to-shit face splits into a bloody, gummy grin. “Your woman has the nicest tits I’ve seen in a while.”

Breathe, I tell myself. Don’t let him win.

I shove the gun harder against his forehead, causing him to fall back. “Tell me where my sister is.”

The bastard just smiles at me some more. There's not a trace of fear on his face. "You have a sister?"

He knows that I can't kill him now. Not until he gives me what I want. It's giving him power, confidence. I pull the gun off his forehead and point it at his leg. When I pull the trigger and blasts his knee to bits, he howls.

I get to my feet and wipe the blood off my hands. "You think I'm playing, motherfucker?" I growl. "I will take a piece of you, one inch at a time, until you give me what I want. Each will hurt more than the last. Now, *where* the fuck is my baby sister?"

Boris snarls at me for a second. "Your sister... oh! you mean that little slut I sold to the auction rings? *That* sister? She's long gone by now."

My body goes cold. *Not the rings. Anything but the fucking rings.*

"You're lying."

He grins again. "Am I?"

Furious, I drop my gun and start punching. I keep punching until he's even bloodier than before. I don't stop until someone physically pulls me off him. I'm about to whirl around and punch the asshole who stopped me before I realize it's Nikolai.

"Brother," he says gently, "we don't want the bastard dead just yet."

"I'm going to kill him one day. Slowly."

"And I'll be happy to help. But for right now, we need him alive."

My fists are aching for more, but there's no denying that Nikolai is right. I nod and he orders the men to load an unconscious Boris into the back of one of our armored jeeps.

"Make sure to secure him down in the cellar. Restrain him with everything we have. I don't want him to be able to even blink."

They salute and jump to carry out my orders. Meanwhile, I drag myself up the stairs and out of that nightmare house. Slumping into the seat of the lead car, I sigh and close my eyes. Nikolai joins me behind the wheel.

“Alyssa?” I ask gruffly without opening my eyes.

“She should be almost at the estate by now. I’ve ordered Stepan to put her in one of the bedrooms and lock her in.”

“No.”

Nikolai’s eyes snap to me. “No?”

“She’s proved time and time again that she can’t be trusted. I want her back in the basement and this time, I want the door locked *and* bolted. No one gets in or out without my permission. I don’t want Lev having access to her, either.”

Nikolai stays uncharacteristically silent.

“What?” I bark.

“Nothing. If those are your orders, I’ll see them through.”

“I feel like there’s a ‘but’ in there somewhere.”

He shrugs. “Lev has been asking for her since we brought him back home.”

“Exactly. He’s far too attached already. She’s not going to be around for very much longer and he needs to adjust to life without her.”

Nikolai falls back into silence. I decide to not let that irritate me. By the time we get to the house, Alyssa has been locked down in the basement and Boris has been confined to the shed cell with Alan.

But my head is a mess.

Polina’s still out there. A fresh new pawn circulating in the skin trade. And extracting her has just gotten ten times more complicated.

I walk into the living room and start pacing. *I need to plant men in the ring. I need to get information on future auctions. I*

need to determine where she's being moved. If she's already been sold.

Fuck.

Fuck.

FUCK!

“Brother.”

I come to an abrupt stop and turn to Nikolai, who's standing in the threshold of the door. “Take a breath,” he advises.

“*You* take a breath. How can you be so calm?”

“Because we can't both be a mess right now.”

I glower at him. “I'm not—”

“Yes, you are,” he hisses. “And you need to stop being so hard on yourself. I know you feel responsible—”

“That's because I *am* responsible, Nikolai. Pol and Lev, they're *my* responsibilities. It was my job to keep them safe. I'm the one who exposed them to Alyssa. I'm the one who turned a blind eye when they started forming attachments with her.”

“Neither Polly nor Lev are babies anymore, Uri. You can't control everyone all the time.”

There it is again, that word: *control*. Alyssa flung it at me enough times, with enough disdain, that it came to feel like a dirty word. An accusation. A curse.

“I'm not trying to control anyone; I'm trying to *protect* them! It's all I've been trying to do for the past eight fucking years!”

Nikolai takes a deep breath. “You can't blame the girl for this, Uri.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Are you suggesting I'm being too hard on her?”

He doesn't blink or back down. “She's been through a lot. Maybe, instead of blaming her, you should go down there and talk to her.”

“You cannot be serious.”

“Listen, I’m just—”

“One minute, you’re telling me I’m too close and now, you want me to go down there and talk to her? Make your mind up, *brat*.”

“I get that you’re angry. And worried. I am, too. But blaming Alyssa isn’t going to change the situation. You need to talk to her. See if she can remember anything that might help us get Polly back.”

He’s making a lot of sense and it’s pissing me off. But I’m entirely too worked up right now to take his advice, good as it might be. It’s hard to accept that I’m falling to pieces. It’s harder still to accept that Nikolai is the one with a cool head on his shoulders. That maybe *I* might be the one who’s being unreasonable.

“You know what? You wanna waste your time talking to her—go right ahead. Me? I’ll be looking for our sister.”

Then I storm off, feeling the guilt follow me like a bad stench I can’t scrub off.

ALYSSA

“Are you pregnant?”

I’ve been dreading this moment since the second I was told by Uri’s stone-faced brother that a doctor was coming in to see me.

Luckily, he didn’t stick around for the entirety of the appointment. Although, if he’s anything like Uri, he’s probably lurking in the shadows on the other side of the locked basement door, waiting for Dr. Emily Popov to finish examining me.

“Please,” I say, grabbing her hand. “*Please* don’t tell him.”

Her eyes veer to the door. “Ma’am...”

“Him *or* his brother. No one. If they know, I... I just can’t deal with that right now.”

The doctor’s eyes soften with compassion. “You’ve been through a lot recently. The drugs that you were given will make your memory of the last few days patchy. Some memories might come back; some you may lose forever.”

If it weren’t for Polly, I wouldn’t mind losing the whole damn week. I swallow down the bitter taste of incoming tears. “What are you trying to say?”

“I’m saying you need support, Alyssa. You need to be looked after. *Especially* if you’re pregnant.”

“Uri doesn’t want to look after me,” I whisper in a small voice. “He hates me.”

I have no idea why I'm telling the doctor all this. She's a virtual stranger and I have no reason to trust her. Especially since Nikolai mentioned that she is the Bratva doctor. If she's loyal to anyone, it's them, not me. But there's something about her dark brown eyes and soft smile that's loosening my tongue.

It may also have something to do with the fact that she's the first person to look at me with any kind of compassion since I was taken.

The only exception is when Uri saved me from Boris's underground cell. For one brief, beautiful moment, he held me like I meant something to him. He kissed me like he cared. But it ended so fast that I wonder if the whole thing was a drug-fueled hallucination.

"He doesn't hate you."

I focus my attention back on the petite brown-haired woman. "You don't know Uri Bugrov very well, do you?"

She smiles. "Would you believe that I used to babysit him and his brother? My father was the doctor for the Bugrov Bratva before me. After he retired, I took his position." Emily winks and pats the back of my hand reassuringly. "I've known Uri for a very long time, Alyssa. He may come off as cold, but he's not a cold person. Not in the ways that matter."

I shake my head. "Maybe not. But he has reason to be cold with me. I'm the reason Polly's gone. I'm the reason she's in danger."

Emily folds my fingers in hers. "Stress is not good for the baby, Alyssa. You need to be kinder to yourself."

"How can I be, when Polly's still in danger? I've been trying to wrack my brains the last two days, trying to remember what happened. They were... I think they were speaking in Russian. They mentioned something but I couldn't understand. I couldn't... I couldn't..."

"Hey now. Take a deep breath."

Sometimes, it feels like my whole damn life has been a series of deep breaths. When do I get to the part where I can just

breathe easy and it doesn't take effort or thought or pain?

"Uri and Nikolai will find Polly. They'll make this right."

"I need to make it right," I sob. "This is all my fault." I cover my face with my hands and cry into my palms. I can taste the salt of my own tears.

"Alyssa, look at me." It's hard not to be drawn in by the kindness in her voice. I lift my watery eyes to hers. "You're going to be okay and so is your baby. I'm not going to tell anyone that you're pregnant."

My eyes go wide. "You aren't?"

"I'm not." She shakes her head. "I'm hoping that *you* will tell Uri soon, though. I assume he's the father?"

I swallow. "H-how did you know?"

"Just a feeling I got when he told me about you. That and the way you speak about him. There's obviously something there."

"Yeah. Hurt, anger, and resentment. And a lot of hate."

Emily gives me a small smile. "You'd be surprised at how close together love and hate can travel."

Love? What a joke.

Love? No way.

Love?! Get fucking real.

I'm so stunned by the ridiculousness of the word that I don't even attempt to deny it as Emily gets to her feet and starts gathering together all her medical equipment. "I'll leave you with some prenatal vitamins. I need you to take them every day. And eat well. Lots of water and vegetables. Get your rest, too. I understand that you're worried about Polly, but you need to take care of yourself and this baby. If you don't... I'm gonna have to break my promise and tell Uri myself. Is that clear?"

I nod meekly and take the bottle of prenatal vitamins she hands me. "Will you come see me again?" I ask when she's at the door.

“I’ll come back next week for a follow-up.”

My stomach sinks. I was hoping that she’d be able to come sooner, if for no other reason than that I need some human contact. I need to talk to someone who treats me like I’m a real person, not a pawn on a chessboard.

Emily knocks twice on the basement door and, a second later, it opens. She gives me a last parting smile before she disappears and the door slams closed.

When she’s gone, I lie back down on the bed and stare up at the ceiling. Despite the doctor’s advice, the only thing that keeps circling around in my head is Polly.

A pair of hazel eyes, begging for help through the darkness.



I wake up in cold sweats, so sure that they’re right there in front of me that I reach out, trying to grab Polly from their grasp.

“No!” I gasp. “No! You can’t take her.”

The darkness scatters away from me and I grasp at thin air. *It was a dream. Just a dream.* I’m not in that cell anymore. I’m in an entirely different basement, living an entirely different nightmare.

But once reality settles in, something pushes through the thick curtain of my memory—Polly’s panicked voice as she told me what the Russians were discussing. There’s something else scraping the surface of my memory but I can’t quite reach it.

It doesn’t matter. I have *something* to offer Uri. Something that might help him locate Polly. I stumble out of bed and half-limp towards the door. My right leg still hasn’t woken up, but I ignore the pins and needles as I start pounding my fists against the basement door.

“Hey! Anyone! I need to speak to Uri. It’s important!”

“Pipe down!”

I jerk away from the door, startled by the deep, commanding voice. Apparently, I've got guards stationed outside my basement prison this time. I shake it off. Now's not the time to be worried about myself.

I keep up a steady stream of pleas. "I have important information I need to share. Please. Just give me five minutes. It's about Polly! *Please!*"

I hear the door unlock. I step away from the door just before it swings open. But it's not Uri standing on the other side; it's his sour-faced older brother. They have the same bone structure, but whereas Uri's is gaunt and sharp, Nikolai's is blurred by stubble and more flesh around the jowls. His eyes burn a darker shade of blue.

"What do you need to say?"

I could tell him. I *should* tell him. But I need to see Uri. I don't know his brother—I'm not sure I even *like* his brother—and I'm definitely not gonna trust him with this information.

"I'll only speak to Uri."

"How convenient," he drawls in a scathing, deadpan voice that matches his expression.

"Please. This could potentially help get Polly back."

His eyes narrow. Is that hope I see flickering across his face? Before I can figure it out, he slams the door closed hard enough that I almost lose a toe under the edge.

I recoil, confused. *What the hell?* Is that a good sign or a bad one? Did he think I was bluffing? That this was a ploy to see Uri again or something?

I'm on the verge of giving up entirely and just telling him what I remember from the Russians' cell when the door opens again, almost taking my toes off for a second time.

"A little warning would be nice!" I snap, lunging out of the way.

When I look up, Uri is standing there with his eyebrows raised, a stone-cold scowl on his face. It doesn't take a genius to interpret: *This better be good or you're a dead woman.*

It's odd to see him so not put-together. His shirt is wrinkled, his hair mussed, and the dark circles under his eyes say he hasn't slept in days.

My first instinct is to apologize. But I have a feeling that if I start with that, he's just gonna shut the door in my face before I can get a single word out. So I jump straight to the important point.

"I remember something about Polly."

"Say it." His voice is curt and robotic. Colder than ice. Nothing has ever been more emotionless.

"Polly and I were left in that cell for hours, maybe longer, before two men came down with food for us. They were Russian."

He rolls his eyes and turns to leave.

"Wait! They had this conversation in Russian and I couldn't understand it—but Polly could."

Uri pauses, halfway turned toward the stairs. "Did she tell you what they said?"

I nod, desperately hoping that this information is going to help find her. "They were planning on selling her. Auctioning her off to the highest bidder."

"And?"

I stop short. *And?* That's it! *Why can't I remember anything else?* My body heats up and my palms start sweating. "Th—that's all she told me."

He grinds his teeth together. "Did the Russians mention *who* they were planning on selling her to?"

My heart sinks. "No."

"Are you sure?"

"I... I can't remember anything else. The drug... Dr. Popov said my memory would be hazy."

"So what you're telling me is that you're useless right now."

“Now that you know what they took her for, can’t you... narrow it down? Maybe...” I trail off when I see the murderous glint in his eyes.

He advances on me, huge and terrifying. “Do you know how many sex slave rings exist in the underbelly of this city? How many warehouses and empty buildings hide auctions of men wagering on scared, helpless women? How many doors I’d have to kick down just to get close, and how fast they move and scatter at the slightest sign of an intruder? By the time we narrow it down... it’ll be *too fucking late*.”

Every single word he throws at me hurts worse than the last. I flinch against his anger—but I make myself stand my ground, because I *deserve* his anger. I deserve his hate.

This is all my fault.

My fault.

My fault.

“Fucking hell,” he growls. “Coming down here was a waste of my time.”

He turns to leave again but I reach out and grab his arm. It’s a knee-jerk reaction that surprises me as much as it does him. He looks down at my hand on his arm before his gaze veers up to mine.

“Uri, please,” I say desperately, “I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry. I —”

He rips his arm free. “What the hell do you want from me, Alyssa?”

I cringe. What *do* I want from him? Those eyes of his are weapons in their own right. “I want... I want you to stay.”

For a moment, I think he’s trying to hug me. Then his fingers twist into the hair at the back of my head and I realize what he’s really trying to do. I wince as he yanks my head back and glares down at me.

“‘Stay’?” he growls, his face only inches from mine. I should be terrified but strangely, his proximity is making it easy to ignore my fear. “I can barely even *look* at you.”

My throat is a solid brick, every breath an agonizing effort. “I know this is my fault,” I whisper to him. “And I would do anything to make it right. I’d take her place if I could.”

Something ripples across his face. I barely catch it before his lips fall hard on mine. It’s the most violent kiss we’ve ever shared. It tastes like salt and desperation, like anger and pain. I lap it all up, absorbing it all, dreading the moment when it will end.

And it does end, a second later. When he lets go and glares down at me as though I just tricked him into doing what he chose to do himself.

“No. *No*. You’re not doing this to me anymore. You want to fuck something?” he hisses. “Go fuck your toys.”

Then he pushes me away and, before I’ve gained my footing, the door swings shut. I stumble back into my bed and hide underneath the covers.

But there’s no hiding from my thoughts. There’s no hiding from fear. There’s no hiding from the pain.

So I lie in bed—and endure.

URI

Bzz. Bzz. Bzz.

I jerk awake in a bleary daze. I must've fallen asleep at my desk, right on top of a sheet of contact numbers for informants I spent the night calling to accrue as much data as humanly possible about slave ring activity in the city.

I glance at the time and curse under my breath. That's three hours wasted on sleep. Useless, worthless sleep that gets me no closer to Polly.

Bzz. Bzz. Bzz.

The sound is my phone vibrating with a call. It's an unknown number, which means it's definitely one of my informants. I grab the phone and do my best to iron out the sleep from my voice.

"Mr. Bugrov, this is Fredrich."

"What do you have for me?"

"Unfortunately... nothing."

The word feels too cruel to be true. "What do you mean, 'nothing'?"

"I poked around all the active auctions taking place last night, sir. There was no girl who matched the description you gave me."

I grit my teeth together. "What about the next few days?"

“There’s only two taking place that I know of. One uptown, one downtown. I did manage to get my hands on the catalogs. I’ll send both to you now. If she’s not on those lists, then either it’s a private sale or she’s somewhere else entirely. I’m afraid we’ve exhausted every other possibility there is.”

“Send me the lists. I’ll look over them now.”

“Yes, sir.”

He hangs up and I watch my phone like it’s a ticking time bomb until it pings. I open the text thread and open the first of two documents he’s sent me. There are thirteen girls on the downtown auction block. None of them are my sister.

I move on to the uptown list. Six girls. No Polly.

Fuck me.

I stand up as new rage floods through me. I need to punch something. And I know just the punching bag to use.

I storm downstairs, through the too-empty hallways of my home, and burst outside into the gardens. It’s cold outside but I barely feel the pinch as I make my way towards the shed.

This *mudak* is going to talk—one way or another.

I turn on the brightest lights and storm down the steps. Alan is writhing on his thin mattress as though the light is physically hurting him. Boris, on the other hand, is sitting stoically on his iron chair, restrained with barbed wire at the wrists and ankles, looking at me through narrowed eyes that aren’t the slightest bit disturbed. It’s like he’s been biding his time, waiting for me to show up.

“Back again so soon, Uri?” Boris mumbles with a self-satisfied smile. “Must’ve missed me terribly.”

Alan struggles upright, eyes wild and afraid as he watches, wondering which of them I’m going to go for first.

I stride to Boris. “Who did you sell my sister to?”

Boris laughs. When he finally subsides, he puts on a show of trying to remember. “Hm, you know what? I’ve forgotten. Help jog my memory, will you?”

I slug him in the stomach. I feel the dry crunch of bone breaking beneath my fist. Boris grunts wordlessly, his torso going concave instantly, but the barbed wire keeps him from doubling over too far.

“God have mercy,” Alan gasps, cowering deeper into his side of the cell.

“God won’t help you, Alan. He won’t help either of you.” I turn my attention back to Boris. “I cracked a rib that time, Sobakin. You sure you want me to break another one?”

His breathing is coming in punctured puffs but he still manages a noncommittal shrug. “Do what you see fit.”

His face is already minced meat from last time, but I take my knuckles to it again. Blood spurts and more bones are reduced to dust.

When I finally stop to take a breath, Alan has his face buried under his pillow and Boris’s head is lolling uselessly from his neck. I grab him by his thinning hair and force his face up towards mine. “Are you ready to talk now?”

Boris spits out a mouthful of clotted blood and two destroyed teeth. “What do you want to discuss?” he asks calmly. “The weather? The Lakers game? Catch anything good on television lately?”

My knuckles are raw and bloody but they clench tight all over again. Apparently, it will take a lot more than simple torture to get him to crack. Which means I need to get creative.

I let go of him in disgust and stalk towards the weapons cabinet I keep padlocked in the corner. I unlock it and pull out one of my handcrafted Swiss blades. When I test the edge with the lightest of touches, my finger comes away marked with a thin line of blood.

Alan’s eyes go wide when he sees the blade catching the fluorescent light. Boris looks unmoved. “Going to carve me up for dinner?” he drawls.

“Have you ever been flayed, Boris?” I ask, grabbing a chair and pulling it towards him. “They say it can be so painful that

you start begging for the exposed part of your body to be cut off altogether.”

He looks intrigued. “I guess we’ll find out, won’t we?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “You underestimate me.”

“No,” he snaps, showing his teeth. “*You* are the one underestimating *me*. Mind over matter, my friend. Mind over matter. Torture me all you want—my mind won’t feel a thing.”

Grinding my teeth, I grab his arm and pull it towards me. “We’ll see about that.”

I start at his forearm and bear down until his skin comes up in nauseating ribbons. I watch his face the whole time. He’s chalk-white and shivering at the jaw but he doesn’t scream. He doesn’t so much as attempt to pull his arm away. And he doesn’t plead for me to stop.

When I hold up the band of skin I’ve carved off, Boris opens his eyes and gives me a tight smile. “Your workmanship is admirable, Uri.”

Despite his mind over matter bullshit, there’s pain etched all over his face. He’s sweating like a pig and his eyes are loose marbles in their sockets.

“I’ll keep going then.”

His jaw clenches. “Go ahead. I can take it.”

I push off my stool so hard that it topples to the ground. “But why would you *want* to?”

“Because *this* is exactly what I wanted.” The red veins in his eyes darken and throb. “Your pain. Your fear. Your inner turmoil. *That* was always the goal.”

I nod and rise, dropping the bloodied knife onto the table at my side. “You want to see me suffer? The feeling is mutual. But I think I’ve been going about this wrong. You hurt me by taking the one I loved. I ought to pay you back in kind.” I lean in so close that I can smell his raw, oozing flesh. “I will find the people you love the most. I will find the people you hold dear and I will make you watch as I carve the skin from *their* fucking bodies.”

His teeth flash—what’s left of them, that is. “Unfortunately for you, there is no one I love. There is no one I care about.”

His voice holds steady—but there’s something else there. It only lasts a second, but I catch the fear that flits across his eyes.

It’s all the confirmation I need.

I smile slowly. “You sure about that?”

He swallows, trying to hide his nerves behind a smile. But his grin this time is weak and unconvincing.

I laugh at him as I take my leave. “I’ll see you soon, Boris. Next time, I’ll bring company.”

ALYSSA

There are moments in the midst of the cyclical pattern of eating, sleeping, and crying when it feels like I might just be going insane.

What was I doing at fourteen? Freaking out about freshman year homecoming. Learning to walk in heels with Ziva in the attic. Sneaking out to Elle's place, even though our parents would have been perfectly fine with us going there if we'd only asked permission. We had to create drama because our lives were so normal.

We talked about clothes and music. We laughed a lot about stupid shit. We made plans for the future and we giggled about boys we thought were cute and gossiped about girls we thought were bitchy.

That was normal for a fourteen-year-old. That was right.

I can't stop thinking about Polly and what she must be going through now. She's fourteen years old—and facing sex slavery. Fourteen years old—and staring down the gun of horrible, endless abuse. Fourteen and alone. Fourteen and afraid.

And it's all *my fucking fault*.

Why did I think bringing her along was a good idea? I lost Lev to the enemy and somehow, I thought that bringing Polly along would be different? I'm baffled by my own stupidity, my own short-sightedness.

Sure, Polly isn't the same fourteen-year-old I was. She knows this world and the stakes involved. She lost her parents so young that she had to grow up twice as fast.

But that's no excuse.

I have no excuses and no plans to fix things, which means I'm left here lying in a bed of my own making with no choice but to try desperately bargaining with any higher power who might be willing to turn a listening ear in my direction.

Please protect her. Keep her safe. Help us find her. I'll do anything.

I'll do anything.

It's been a while since my last meal. Not because Svetlana hasn't brought them down, but because I lost my appetite right around the time Uri kissed me, told me to fuck off, and then left.

I know I need to think of my baby, but I can't muster up the strength or the will to force food down my throat. I'm not hungry. My stomach feels comfortably hollow. Empty—like the rest of me.

It feels like it's been weeks since Dr. Popov came to see me but I know it's only been a handful of days. I have to get my shit together before her next visit or I'm risking her telling Uri about my pregnancy. If he finds out through anyone else but me, he'll...

Well, I have no idea what he'll do.

But it's not like he can look at me any worse than he already does, right?

I flinch when the door unlocks and swings open. I don't bother turning to check who it is. Probably just Svetlana with another tray I'm gonna ignore. I hug my pillow a little tighter and wait for the door to shut again.

Soon. Any time now. Why isn't she—

“Alyssa.”

I open my eyes and see Uri's blurry face hanging over mine. I blink a couple of times until he starts to focus. His face is all wrong, though. The jaw is too square and soft. His eyes are too dark.

Oh. Not Uri. Nikolai.

"Alyssa, can you sit up for me?"

"No," I retort childishly, burying my face underneath my pillow. I have no desire to speak to anyone, much less Uri's dispassionate brother. "Go away."

He doesn't listen. Despite how tightly I'm holding the pillow over my head, his voice still comes through clear. "You haven't eaten anything in over twenty-four hours."

"Why do you care?"

There's a pause. "I just do."

Frowning, I poke half of my face out so I can see him from the corner of my eye. "That doesn't make any sense."

"What doesn't?"

"That you care."

He frowns. "Because you see me as some sort of unfeeling monster?"

"Obviously." It comes out before I can stop it. I'm past the point of thinking about my responses before I say them. That requires energy that I just don't have at the moment.

He sighs and sits down on the floor beside my bed so we can see eye to eye.

"You'll have to pardon me for not being friendlier," he says in a tired voice. "I was busy taking care of my brother and worrying about my sister."

Way to give me the middle finger without actually having to give it. I push myself up on my elbows and lift my head from the mattress. "I'm sorry."

He shakes his head. "I'm not here to make you feel bad, Alyssa. I'm here because I'm worried about you."

“Why?”

“Because you’ve been through a significant trauma. You need to speak to someone about it. Suppressing it never works. Not for long, anyway.”

If I squint, he looks a lot like Uri. I have to resist the urge, though. I don’t want him to think I’m completely insane.

“Even if you don’t feel like talking,” he continues, “you have to try. Emily said—”

“You spoke to Dr. Popov?” I shove myself all the way upright. “What did she tell you?”

“She told me that you were showing signs of PTSD and that you needed to be taken care of. She called yesterday to ask how you were doing.”

“So that’s why you’re here now?”

“Among other reasons.” He sighs. “Would it help if I got her down here to talk to you?”

I hesitate before I shake my head. “The only person I want to speak to won’t even look at me.”

Nikolai winces and scrubs a hand over his stubbled beard. “It’s because he’s hurting, Alyssa. He prides himself on being this family’s protector. He’s taking it all personally.”

“‘Personally’?” I laugh right in Nikolai’s face. “He’s not taking it personally; he’s taking it out on *me*.”

Right on cue, that familiar, thudding cadence strikes up again in my head.

My fault.

My fault.

My fucking fault.

It’s hard to be mad at Uri when I know he’s right to despise me.

“I know it seems that way, but he doesn’t blame you; he blames himself. And I’ll admit... I blamed him, too, for a while.” I raise my eyebrows and Nikolai continues with a

grimace. “I thought it was foolish and short-sighted to bring you here and expose you to Lev and Polly. He was putting his needs above the family’s. I said he was acting irresponsibly. But... I also underestimated his feelings for you.”

My eyes go wide. “His feelings for me? What feelings? He *hates* me.”

Now, it’s Nikolai’s turn to bark an incredulous laugh. “Uri wouldn’t bother wasting his anger on you if he didn’t feel something else to go with it. Trust me on that.”

I can only gawk at Nikolai open-mouthed. He’s wrong—he has to be—I can feel it in my bones. But which part is wrong? Where’s the flaw in the theory? I’m trapped down here in this basement and Uri is staying far away upstairs, so this is all I have to go on.

It’s pathetic how eager I am to latch onto it.

“Now, will you eat a little something or do I need to get Emily in here?”

I nod grudgingly. “I’ll eat.” Nikolai brings the tray of food around and I pick at the warm croissant. My stomach roils but it doesn’t translate to my appetite. I eat anyway.

“I-is there any news... about Polly?” I venture.

Nikolai shakes his head gently. “Not yet.” He meets my gaze for a second. “But don’t worry: if anyone can find Polly, it’s Uri.”

Just like the rest of what he’s said, I have to believe that, too.

The only alternative is madness.

URI

I've been pulling at different threads for hours now. Each one comes up empty. Each call leaves me with more worry than reassurance.

I've pored over the names of the men who are a frequent part of the skin auctions. All of them are rich and powerful. And each one has their own perversions.

There's a Belgian with a taste of sadomasochism. A Czech who loves to share his purchases with all his soldiers. An American who experiments with bestiality.

Monsters, one and all.

And my fourteen-year-old sister is at the center of their web.

I've got my men scouring every little pocket of the city, trying to get whatever information they can about upcoming transactions. But the private ones are still shrouded behind a thick veil of secrecy. Every time I try to penetrate it, the trail disappears altogether, leaving me grasping at smoke and half-formed rumors.

The fact that I haven't slept properly in over forty-eight hours isn't helping matters.

My head feels heavy. So does my chest. Sometimes, when I blink, I see Polly, stripped and strung up like a piece of meat for all those depraved animals to leer at.

"Fuck," I mutter to my empty office. "FUCK!"

Every damn second that ticks by is another second I'm losing to those beasts. What if she's already been put up for sale? What if she's already gone? What if someone lecherous fuck has his hands on her right now?

I get to the point where I feel as though poking my eyeballs out is the only option left. It's been a few hours since Nikolai left and as much as we butt heads sometimes, his presence has been calming. Especially when I'm spiraling.

And I'm *definitely* spiraling.

I snatch up my phone and dial. He answers quickly. "Nikolai?"

"Uri? Fucking hell, man, are you okay?"

"Of course I'm okay. What kind of question is that?"

"You sound drunk."

My jaw clenches. "I'm not."

"I take it you haven't slept yet then."

Why did I want to call him again? I start pacing between the door and the window. It's beginning to get lighter outside which means I've stayed awake through yet another night. "Any leads?"

"Not since the last time you called me... twenty-four minutes ago."

Has it only been that long? In my head, it's been countless hours. "There has to be something, Niko," I snarl. "I saw the bastard's eyes when I mentioned his loved ones. He's got someone out there that he cares about. A child. A parent. A sibling. A woman. We've got to find out who."

"I'm working on it, Uri." Nikolai's voice is uncharacteristically gentle. "Trust me: I'm looking. But I need you to go to sleep."

Doesn't he get it? Sleeping would be a betrayal to Polly. What kind of sorry excuse for a brother would snooze while his little sister rots in the hands of the beasts of the underworld?

"I will—"

“Good—”

“—as soon as Polly’s back home.”

“*Goddammit*, you’re stubborn.”

“Let me know as soon as you find out anything.”

I hang up before he can lecture me more. Then I decide to go to the kitchen and make myself some black coffee. At this rate, it feels like I’m made up of one-thirds anguish and two-thirds caffeine.

I’m halfway to the kitchen when I run into Svetlana in the hallway. She’s carrying a bowl of cereal.

“Lev?” I ask.

She nods. “He wakes up early these days.” Her eyes flit towards the basement door in the corner. “Sir... he’s still asking for—”

“No.” Her mouth snaps shut and she nods meekly. “If he asks again, shut it down.”

“Of course, sir.”

She ducks upstairs and I pivot in the direction of the basement. All the pain and hurt and suffering—it’s all because of *her*. If it weren’t for Alyssa, Lev wouldn’t have been abducted and Polly wouldn’t still be gone; my brother wouldn’t be going through Alyssa withdrawal symptoms and my sister wouldn’t be facing sexual enslavement at the ripe old age of fourteen.

“*Blyat*,” I growl as my body takes over, fueled by the rage burrowing its way through me.

Abandoning my coffee, I charge down towards the basement. The soldier on guard duty opens the door at the sight of me and I power through without breaking stride, ready to unleash my anger on her.

She’s lying in the fetal position on the bed, but I can tell at a glance that she’s wide awake and that she has been for a while. I would know—we’ve got matching dark circles under our eyes.

“Did you find Polly?” she asks the moment she sees me.

All that question does is fuel my fury. But she's right—the onus is on *me* to find Polly. It always has been.

“‘Find Polly’?” At the sound of my voice, Alyssa flinches, even though she's still far out of arm's reach. I keep my distance—if I get too close to her, there's no telling what I'll do. Kiss her, fuck her, throttle her... each option seems worse than the last. “How am I supposed to find Polly when you've given me no information?”

“I told you—”

“I already knew about the rings. Tell me something I don't know. You were with her for almost two days and you're telling me you didn't pick up on anything while you were there?”

She pales. “I-I'm trying to remember... but the drugs he gave me—”

“Don't hide behind excuses.”

Her eyes flare wide. First, there's shock; then anger. She springs up off the bed, her slip sliding over her skin like butter. “You think I'm using that as an excuse?” She laughs hysterically. “You think I don't want to get Polly back as fast as possible? You think I'm *enjoying* this?”

“It's your fault she's been taken. I would think you'd be trying harder to remember—”

“Don't you think I want to? I'm spending every damn minute in here going over and over it in my mind, trying to piece together what happened! I'm *killing myself* trying to remember, Uri!”

I grab her elbow and yank her towards me just so that I can snarl in her face, “Try *harder*.”

I don't know what to think when I look at her. I don't know how to be, who to be. It's not escaping my notice that she's lost weight. Her slip hangs off her shoulders, the thin straps revealing her protruding collarbones. Her skin is pale and the arm caught in my grasp feels fragile enough to crumble if I push too hard.

“You coming in here and yelling at me isn’t going to help!” she cries out. “None of this is going to help. God, Uri, you can’t even look at me.”

“Because when I look at you, all I see is betrayal. I trusted you and you stabbed me in the back.”

A broken sob escapes her lips. “Do you really think I need you to tell me how badly I fucked up?”

Her warmth is rubbing off on me and I realize what a dangerous position I’m in. She’s going to lure me in with her siren’s eyes, her soft pleading words, her love for my siblings.

No. I will not be sucked into that black hole again. It may feel like heaven for a few seconds, but I know now that it’s a trap.

So I release her, pushing her off me so that she stumbles back a few paces.

“Please see that, Uri,” she begs as her voice trembles. “I care about getting Polly back just as much as you do. I need you to believe that that’s the truth.”

I swallow the acrid taste in my mouth. Guilt serves no purpose here. It doesn’t bring Polly back even one second sooner. So if Alyssa is torturing herself, locked down here all alone... so be it.

It’s the least she deserves.

“You’re right,” I murmur. “I can’t look at you. And starting from now... I won’t.”

I turn my back on her and start striding towards the basement door. I need distance—room to breathe, to let this cloying guilt work itself out of me. I don’t feel bad for Alyssa. I can’t. I won’t.

“Uri!”

I ignore her. She can scream for me until she’s blue in the face, but I’m not turning back. Until—

“I’m pregnant, you know.”

I freeze at the threshold. All I can hear is her words echoing in my ears, accompanied by the booming thrum of my pulse.

Pregnant.

Pregnant.

Pregnant.

Then: *liar.*

I underestimated the little siren. She really is capable of anything. I would've thought that stooping this low is beyond her... but I guess I would've thought wrong.

I spin around slowly and walk over to her. She looks more fragile than ever, cowering in my shadow, caged between me and the wall by her bed.

“You're lying.”

She stares up at me, blinking back tears and trying not to let me see her chin wobbling. “I'm not. I'm about thirteen weeks along. Ask Dr. Popov if you don't believe me.”

Liar.

Pregnant.

Liar.

Pregnant.

Which one do I believe?

“I will check with the doctor,” I growl at Alyssa. “And if you're lying, I will make you pay.”

Then I stalk out, my heart thundering in my chest.

ALYSSA

“I’m having you examined.”

Sighing, I swing my legs off the bed. I’m disappointed, sure. But I’ve been expecting this since Uri stormed out of the basement yesterday after I dropped the bombshell.

Why did I blab?

Because, fool that you are, you thought it would bring you closer.

“Doctor.” Uri holds the door open a little wider. At the very least, I’m glad I’ll be able to see Dr. Popov again. But when the doctor enters, it’s not Emily with her kind smile and easy compassion. It’s a somber-faced man in a white coat, followed by grim Bratva soldiers bearing loads of intimidating medical equipment.

“Where’s Emily?” I ask as the men set up the equipment a few feet from the bed.

“She’s indisposed,” Uri answers in a deadpan voice. “This is Dr. Grigory Tasarov.”

Dr. Grigory gives me only a cursory glance. One of the soldiers sets a chair in place next to my bed. The doctor sinks into it, but he keeps his eyes fixed on the charts in his hand.

Uri stands like a gargoyle in the corner, huge and silent, shadows cloaking his face. It’s hard to blame him, but his coldness is grating. I wish for the billionth time that I never told him about the baby at all.

With a sigh, Dr. Grigory looks me in the eye for the first time since he's walked in. "Alyssa, how are you feeling today?"

"Pretty disappointed, actually," I say. "And annoyed. And frustrated."

Uri's jaw pulses but he doesn't say anything. The doctor gives me a dour look over the tops of his glasses. "I meant physically."

I shrug. "Tired. My whole body aches. Probably because I haven't been allowed any proper exercise since I was first trapped down here."

Most doctors might view that as "alarming" or, at the very least, "noteworthy." This one doesn't bat an eye. I get the feeling he's seen a lot worse than a hostage in a well-furnished basement getting fed three square meals a day. "How's your appetite?"

"Nonexistent."

"But you are eating?"

"Only when Nikolai comes in here and forces me to."

That, finally, gets a reaction out of Uri. His eyes scour over me as his jaw tightens even further. I'm guessing he didn't know about Nikolai's visits.

Interesting.

"Can you lift up your shirt for me?"

I do as I'm told. Despite being only thirteen weeks along, I definitely have a belly. It's small but it's there. The doctor presses his fingers against the swell and purses up his lips.

"Well, you're pregnant."

I look up at Uri. "You happy now?"

He ignores me. "I want a sonogram done, Doctor. I want to be a hundred percent sure."

"Do you really think I've tricked the doctor, too?" I demand.

Again, he ignores me. *Why does that feel so much worse?*

The doctor turns on the machine and squirts some of the ultrasound jelly onto my belly. It's unexpectedly cold and I squirm in place until my body gets used to the substance. I don't even notice that the screen has lit up with images of my womb.

"Whoa," I breathe. "Is that my baby?"

The doctor's eyes are fixed on the screen as he passes the rod up and down my belly. "Well, what have we here...?"

I frown. "Is everything alright?" The panic starts to build higher and higher the longer he delays answering me. My mind starts to spiral. *Is there something wrong with my baby? Has all the stress affected the fetus? Should I have eaten more? Did I hurt my own baby before it's even born?*

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

I grab my bracelet and try to draw strength from my Z link. God knows I don't have the father's hand to hold, so this will have to suffice.

"It looks like we have twins on our hands."

My hand drops my bracelet. My jaw drops right along with it. "I'm sorry... Did you just say *twins*?"

Dr. Grigory turns to me with the first glimmers of a muted smile. "I did. You're having two babies, Alyssa."

I let out a breath that comes out as a sob and a gasp all rolled up into one. "*I'm* a twin," I say softly.

"It does tend to run in families. Congratulations."

I can't rub my belly because of all the ultrasound gunk lathered all over it but I look down at myself and I experience a rare moment of happiness. It's a welcome respite from the last few weeks.

Twins.

My God.

Ziva, wherever you are... thank you.

“Can you tell if they’re going to be boys or girls?” I ask excitedly.

Dr. Grigory pats my knee. “I’m afraid it’s too early to tell. But another month and we should be able to discern.”

“Twins,” I repeat again, looking once more towards the screen. I can see the tiny little peanuts floating around in my belly. “Twins, Ziva.”

I grab my Z link again. It’s probably silly but it feels like a sign. A sign that I’m not alone. That Ziva is here with me—guiding me, helping me, protecting me. I’m not completely alone, even if it feels that way more often than not.

I turn towards Uri, excited to see his reaction. But all my joy curdles in my chest when I notice the deadpan scowl on his face. It’s utterly emotionless. He may as well have been told that his brake pads need to be changed.

“Thank you, Doctor,” he rumbles at last before gesturing to his men to help the doctor pack away his equipment. “We can wrap this up.”

It takes everything I have in me not to bury my face in the pillow and scream.

Before he leaves, Dr. Grigory prescribes some prenatal vitamins for me, as well as medication to help with the nausea. He makes me promise to eat well and drink lots of water and then he leaves with a crisp parting nod.

The security follows, hauling out the equipment the exact same way they hauled it in. I look up, hoping to catch Uri’s eye—but he doesn’t so much as glance at me before the door shuts in my face.

The complete lack of reaction from him leaves me feeling cold and restless. Had he been hoping that I wasn’t pregnant?

Of course he was. No man wants to have a baby with the woman who accidentally caused his sister to be sold into sex slavery. But some naïve part of me actually believed he would be happy.

Idiot.

I lie back down in bed and stare up at the ceiling. A couple of stray tears squeeze out of my eyes but I wipe them away quickly.

I can't let my happiness be dictated by his. It's pretty clear that despite these babies, our futures are on separate paths, veering away from each other.

That's okay. I'll be happy about these babies all on my own if I have to be.

But even as I try to convince myself of that, the worry still nags in the back of my head. Even if Polly is found, will he forgive me? What if Polly is never found? What then? Will he grow to hate his own children like he hates me?

I don't know anymore.

I don't know anything.

URI

Twins.

In six months, I'm going to have *two* children.

It's a mindfuck, but in the best possible way. I just wish I could enjoy it properly. Without all the stress and worry and fear. If only Polly was here and safe, then I could celebrate this news the way it deserves to be celebrated: with fireworks and champagne and the heads of anyone who's ever dared to threaten my family posted up on spikes in the front yard.

The moment Dr. Grigory has driven away, I head into my office and start pacing. It takes a few circuits around my office before I start to process everything that's just been confirmed.

I'm going to be a father. I genuinely thought this moment would happen years down the line—but now that it's upon me, I feel ready. This is a chance for me to redeem myself. This is a second chance for all of us.

And by all of us, I mean my family.

Alyssa is not part of that.

She can't be. She doesn't qualify. Not after her part in Polly's abduction. She may be the mother of my children, but that's where it ends. There's no way I can trust her again after this, and that quashes any kind of future we might have had together.

But *fuck me*... there's still that aching voice in my head that wants it.

That's why I'm pacing. The war between what I have and what I don't. What I want and what I can never allow myself to acknowledge.

My head is not on completely straight before I pick up my cell and call Nikolai.

"I *still* haven't found anything, brother. I told you I'd call if—"

"I'm not calling about that."

Nikolai falls silent for a moment. "You sound weird. Is everything alright?"

"I just had Dr. Grigory come in to examine Alyssa."

"Grigory hasn't retired yet? What happened to Emily?"

"She was getting a little too close to Alyssa," I explain impatiently. "That and the fact that she didn't tell me about Alyssa's condition."

"What condition?"

"Alyssa's pregnant." I'm met with stunned silence on the other line. It makes me wish I'd waited to tell him the news in person. "Nikolai? Did you hear me?"

"I heard you," he says softly. "Is this... is this for real?"

"Grigory just confirmed it. I saw the ultrasound and everything."

"You saw the baby?"

"Babies," I correct. "I'm gonna be a father to twins."

"My fucking God!" Nikolai exclaims. "Are you serious? You are. You're serious. I'll be damned... Is this good news or bad news?"

"In a vacuum, it's good news."

I hear Nikolai take a low breath. "Well then, shit—congratulations, man."

"I need you to keep an eye on her. Make sure she sleeps properly, eats well. It shouldn't be a problem... since you've already been doing that." The bitterness edges into my voice

more than I would've liked. "My only concern is that those babies are born healthy. Then I can deal with Alyssa."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"That's my concern, not yours."

"Uri, c'mon, brother. She's not just your neighbor now; she's the mother of your children. Don't you think you're being a little too harsh on her?"

"No," I growl. "I haven't even begun to be too harsh on her."

A smarter man would take my tone as warning aplenty—but not my brother. "This is not her fault, Uri. She was trapped in that basement for weeks. Of course she was going to try to escape when she had the chance. She had no idea if she could trust *you*."

"Is that what she told you?" I demand. "During one of your cozy little basement chats?"

"Fuck off, *brat*. You're being a child."

I should have waited until we were face-to-face to have this conversation. Then I could have punched him in the mouth. "And you're being a fool. Don't think she isn't using you the same way she used Lev and Polly."

"I'm just trying to—"

"Don't. When I need advice about women, I'll ask. Until then, stay out of my business."

Goddammit. My previous happiness about finding out I was going to be a father has just melted into a whole lot of complicated. How is it that I've become the bad guy in all this?

What *is* it with that little *narushitel*? What kind of spellbinding charm does she have that she's managed to win over every single member of my family? Lev and Polly, I can understand. Lev's vulnerable. And Polly's craved a female role model since our mother died.

But Nikolai? He ought to know better.

I drop down at my desk and try to breathe out the rage circulating through me like poison. I glance at the monitors that I've ignored since the moment Alyssa came back to the basement. My discipline has been on point all this time. No breaks. No lapses. No moments of weakness.

But in a matter of seconds—it crumbles.

I switch the monitor on and the screen comes alive with the image of Alyssa. She's lying on her bed with her t-shirt hiked up over her belly, running her hands over her small stomach as her lips move.

I turn the volume on and catch her voice mid-sentence. No—mid-song. She's *singing* to them.

“... *Papa's gonna buy you a mockingbird... and if that mockingbird won't sing, Papa's gonna buy you a diamond ring...*”

I find myself leaning in. It's a fucking siren song drawing me into deep water, I know that—but I can't stop. The combination of watching her rub her belly, sing to our babies, and say the word “Papa” kindles something inside my core.

My spirits rise.

The possessiveness in me does, too. Those are *my* children. And *my* woman. The first part is natural and welcome. The second part is problematic, to say the least.

I can't let these babies derail my determination. Alyssa and I were doomed the second she put my siblings in danger. I can't allow her to enchant me the same way she's done with the others.

No matter what my heart says.

No matter what my dick says.

I have to stay strong. I have to hate her. Hate is the only thing that will protect me from drowning myself in her.

So I stand corrected: she's not my woman. She's merely the incubator. A vessel to meet my needs.

That's all she can ever be.

ALYSSA

With all the vitamins and medications circulating around in my body, I feel better, physically speaking.

But mentally... that's a whole other minefield.

The foremost worry in my head is obviously Polly. At the top of every hour, I hope that this will be the one when someone comes into the basement to tell me that Polly's been found. That she's safe and unharmed and I can finally sleep easy at night.

But hour after hour passes and no one comes.

The other worry taking up space in my brain is Uri. His nonreaction to finding out we were having twins together breaks my heart all over again every time I think about it. All I can do is cling onto the stupid, desperate hope that he'll come around.

Then there's the host of other little worries that fill the in-between space between the two of them.

What does my future look like? Is Lev okay? Does he ask for me at all? How's Elle doing? Did her wedding go smoothly? Have my parents even noticed that I'm not around anymore? Am I going to be trapped in this basement forever?

Is all this stress going to affect my unborn children?

I'm able to keep food down a little easier, but it's a struggle. My appetite still says "hell no" to every bite I shove down. I keep fighting the good fight, though, if for no other reason than to give my children the nutrients they need.

My one and very unexpected solace has come in the form of Uri's brother. Nikolai visits at least twice a day. Apart from congratulating me on the babies, he steers away from any topic that's too personal. I don't question it too much; I'm too desperate for the company.

Right on cue, he walks in with a plate of cherry danishes for me. We sit in the kitchenette, me nibbling on a pastry and him sipping black coffee, as I contemplate breaking our unspoken rule.

"How's Lev?"

His face twists up with discomfort. But it's been a while since I've seen sunlight and it's driving me insane. It's also making me more and more restless.

"He's fine."

"Why do you look like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like you've swallowed a bad oyster."

"I did once. Spent three days on a toilet."

I wrinkle my nose. "Thanks for that info. And the visual. But it's not enough to distract me. What's going on with Lev? Is he having nightmares?"

Nikolai sighs. "The abduction really messed with his head. And his head wasn't exactly calm before the abduction."

My chest tightens with guilt. "How bad is he?"

"Uri and I take turns spending time with him. But we can't be with him around the clock. George handles the majority of the shifts and when he can't be here, Svetlana takes over."

"D-does he ask for me?" I venture. Nikolai clears his throat uncomfortably, so I nod in resignation. "I'll take that as a yes. Uri is preventing him from seeing me, I'm guessing?"

At that, he doesn't do more than sigh. Why do I get the feeling that the brothers aren't exactly seeing eye to eye on certain things? Definitely Lev. Possibly me?

“I... I never meant to hurt either one of them. You know that, right?”

“Fuck me,” he mutters under his breath before looking up. “I know that, Alyssa. Believe it or not, Uri does, too.”

I shake my head. “That’s just wishful thinking.”

“No, it’s insight. Insight into the complicated mind of Uri Bugrov. He’s just angry. And at the moment, he’s helpless just like the rest of us—and that’s a bad combination. He’s punishing you because he needs someone to blame. It’s easier than admitting that he messed up.”

“How is any of this his fault?”

Nikolai raises his eyebrows. “He messed up the moment he brought you here and he knows it.”

I can’t help wincing. It was stupid of me, I know, but I’d started to think that maybe part of him actually liked me.

He holds up a hand when he sees the look on my face. “Hey now, don’t take it that way. I don’t mean it personally.”

“How else could you possibly mean it?”

“You were the next-door neighbor, Alyssa. He should have just let you go back to your little neck of the woods. You wouldn’t have been involved in this world. But not only did he decide to keep you here, he decided to expose you, too. That, more than anything else, made you a target. It put you in danger and it put Lev and Polly in danger right along with you.”

I shiver, remembering the night that Uri and I met. I can still feel the breeze between my thighs as I dangled on the fence. It was every bit as cool as my cheeks were blazing hot.

He was the one who forced me to stay for dinner that night. As far as I was concerned, I’d have happily run back to my tiny little home and buried my head in the sand for the rest of time.

Part of me wants to get mad. *He* insisted I stay. *He* bandaged my leg. *He* swept all the plates off the table and devoured me like I was his last meal.

But I could have resisted, right? I could've said no at any point and I know beyond any doubt he would've stopped instantly.

Nothing was forced. It was something I did because *I* wanted to.

I sigh and let my face fall onto my crossed arms on the countertop. "I should have just forgotten about the package. Written it off. I should never have hopped that godforsaken fence."

"Coulda, woulda, shoulda," Nikolai says with a shrug. "There's no point going down that road, Alyssa. It'll only drive you insane."

I push my half-eaten danish away. As delicious as they are, I can't force down another bite.

"How are you feeling?" asks Nikolai as he eyes me warily.

It's nice of him to inquire, but there's a small, bitter part of me that wishes that it was Uri who was doing the asking instead. "Miserable, most of the time," I admit. "I think I spend every other second thinking about Polly, wondering where she is. If she's safe. If she's afraid. If she's alone." My breath catches and I bite down on my bottom lip. "I just wish I could remember something that might help. I keep wracking my brain, trying to jog my memory, but it feels like the more I try to remember, the hazier the memories become."

"I wouldn't push yourself that far. Just... let things relax. Maybe it'll come back naturally if you don't force it."

I meet his eyes. "Polly doesn't have that kind of time, Nikolai. She could already have been purchased by now. Every day I don't remember is another day she's suffering."

My chest is so heavy that, despite all the medication I'm taking to prevent nausea, I feel like I need to throw up.

"Can I make a suggestion? What if you were to talk to someone?"

I frown. "Like... you?"

He laughs and shakes his head. "Like a professional. Therapy could help you focus, give you enough clarity that you might

be able to uncover something that might help us.” When I start to protest, he holds up a hand again. “There’s no risk in trying. Even if you don’t succeed in remembering anything, it might help you cope with everything you’re dealing with.”

I bite my bottom lip. “You think Uri will allow it?”

Nikolai’s eyes narrow as he gets to his feet. “Leave that part to me.”

He’s heading to the door when I stop him. I know it’s a long shot but I’ve got to at least ask. I’ve been trapped down here so long that even my skin has started to feel unhealthy. It’s taken on this weird sallow tinge in the last day that I really don’t like.

“Nikolai? Can you do me a favor?”

Immediately, his face pinches up. “That depends on the favor.”

“Can you convince Uri to let me out of the basement for at least a few hours every day? Just to get some sunlight, maybe a walk around the grounds? It would be good for the babies.”

Nikolai’s sigh betrays nothing. The Bugrov brothers really have the whole inscrutable thing down to a science.

“I’ll ask him,” Nikolai says at last. “But no promises, okay?”

I sigh. “There never are.”

URI

I'm busy pouring over fresh leads that look a lot more like dead ends when Nikolai sweeps in.

"Don't you knock?" I ask impatiently.

Nikolai gives me the look he gets every time he's trying to "manage" me. Eyebrows pulled taut with his lips all pursed up like a teenage girl. "Listen, I want to talk to you about some —"

Ring. Ring. Ring.

I hold up my hand and answer the call, cutting Nikolai off mid-sentence. He sighs and sits down opposite me.

"Kruger, tell me you have some news for me."

"No news, boss," the man says with an apologetic sigh. "But I may have another lead. There's a dirty cop on the force who has connections with several local sex rings in the city. Name's Tony Gallagher. If anyone knows where your girl's at, he may be our best bet."

My hands tighten on the edge of my desk. "I want to talk to him face to face. But leave my name out of it when you set up the meeting."

"You got it, boss."

"You got Kruger on the job?" Nikolai asks the moment I hang up.

"He's smart and loyal and we're running out of other options. So yes, brother, I got Kruger on the job." I fold my hands

together and lean forward. “Do you have a problem with my methods?”

Nikolai is unfazed by my intensity. “Everyone’s loyal ‘til they’re not.”

“Did you come here to backseat *pakhan*, or were you going to offer me a useful suggestion?”

“It’s about Alyssa.”

I have to clamp my molars together to stop from letting the twinge of emotion show on my face. Why do I feel like a live wire every time I hear her name? Three little syllables and I’m suddenly frothing at the mouth with the need to hear more—or to hear a whole hell of a lot less.

“Hear me out. I want her to see a therapist. Maybe it’ll help jog some of her memories, possibly get us some real information that will lead us to Polly.”

My first instinct is to say, *Fuck that*. Why the hell should I pay for a shrink to come help soothe Alyssa’s traumatized psyche? She did this shit to herself—and to me, to my sister, to my family, to my Bratva.

But... it’s a decent suggestion. Practical and plausible, so long as I leave the emotions out of it.

“Fine. Worth a shot.”

Nikolai nods with satisfaction and pulls out his phone. “I can give Katina a call. Heard she’s dabbling in hypnosis, too. Maybe we can give that a try if all else fails.”

Truth be told, I could go for some of that. Have Katina wave a dangling pocket watch in my face and bewitch me until I forget all about the little *narushitel* in the Garfield panties.

But I’m barely concentrating anymore. My mind is preoccupied with the images I saw of Alyssa this morning on the monitor. She had gone into the bathroom and when she came out, she was wearing nothing but a towel. It wasn’t until she plucked it off that you could tell she was pregnant. Her tiny little belly betraying the fact that she has two of my babies inside her.

Hypnotize me out of *that* shit, too—because as it turns out, it’s a big turn-on.

With everything that’s happening, I shouldn’t even be able to get hard right now. Especially not for her.

“I was hoping to run something else by you,” Nikolai says, breaking up an unwelcome parade of thoughts about licking Alyssa between her thighs while gazing up at her pregnant belly.

I rub my temples preemptively. “Why do I get the feeling I’m not going to like this?”

Again, Nikolai is unfazed. “Those babies need fresh air, Uri. Alyssa’s been trapped down there long enough. Give her freedom of the house, of the grounds. She’s not going to run. I’ll make sure the security around the estate is tight.”

I wave my hand in the air. “Fine. Whatever.”

“‘Fine’? Just like that? You’re okay with it?”

He’d need a team of wild horses to drag this truth out of me, but in reality, this decision is entirely selfish on my part. Keeping her locked in the basement makes it harder for me to see her whenever I want to. It’s not like I can “accidentally” run into her down there unless I trip and fall down two flights of stairs.

And the monitor is just not cutting it anymore.

I grit my teeth and try to focus on something other than Alyssa. There may be a chance that I’m thinking way too much about this.

At this point, I can only hope she’s a hypnotist in her own right. A clever, manipulative puppet master who’s got me under her spell.

It’s easier to accept than the alternative.

That I may just be that weak.



Kruger set the meeting up three blocks from the police station. I suppose there's something to be said for hiding in plain sight—but as a man who's spent my whole life operating on the dark side of the law, it's unsettling to conduct business literally in the shadow of a building filled with men who enforce it.

Well, mostly enforce it. The one I'm here to meet with today might help me bend things enough to drag Polly back through the cracks in the system.

I park just in front of a police cruiser and step out of the car. It's an empty lot, strewn with tumbleweeds and trash, infested by rats burrowing through piles of junk in the corners. A chain-link fence plastered with placards advertising some bullshit tech company rings the perimeter.

In the shadows along one wall, I see Kruger and the Gallagher cop. When the latter man sees me coming, he stiffens and glances accusingly at Kruger.

"You didn't tell me anyone else was coming," he hisses just before he turns around. His eyes go wide when he catches sight of me. "Fucking hell. Are you—"

"Uri Bugrov," I say smoothly, offering him my hand. "And you're Tony Gallagher."

Tony is still glaring daggers at Kruger. "Yeah. That's me."

I nod solemnly. "I won't waste your time, Officer. I just need some information and I'm told you are the man to see."

Gallagher shifts uncomfortably, his eyes darting around the lot like he's worried we're being watched. "Listen... I... I got a reputation to protect."

"And it is safe with me—as long as you do what you can to give me the information I need. I hear you have connections to the rings."

One eyelid starts twitching. It looks like the man is buffering with pure, uncut anxiety. He sighs and his chin droops to his chest. "You looking for something in particular?"

"Someone in particular." I pull out the picture of Polly that I slipped into my jacket pocket earlier. A headshot from her

school yearbook.

Gallagher stares at the picture for a long time before he drags his eyes back up to mine. “She a relation or something?” I narrow my stare and he balks. “Never mind. Don’t matter. Not my business. Let me make some calls.”

He pulls out his phone and walks away. “*Blyat*’,” I mutter under my breath. “He didn’t recognize her.”

Kruger stares off after Gallagher. “Is it possible that we need to expand our search? Gallagher’s got connections, but only to the local rings. What if this went bigger?”

I don’t respond because the cop’s already walking back to us. Judging from the pinch of his eyebrows, I’m not going to like what he has to say.

“No one’s seen a girl like that,” he says, confirming my worst suspicions. “But listen, it’s not so easy to locate a girl once she gets dropped into the marketplace. Oftentimes, sellers will change up their appearance to help avoid detection. Color her hair, change up her look, pierce a nose or some shit... Your girl could look completely different by now.”

Fuck. I know he’s right. I just wish like hell he wasn’t.

“Will you keep a lookout?” I ask. “There’s a payout in it for you.”

Gallagher swallows. “Then I’ll definitely keep an eye out.”

I dismiss him with a nod and he ambles off towards his cruiser. Kruger turns to me looking grim. “What’s the next plan of action, sir?”

“I need you to look into any international ring with a footprint in Los Angeles. It’s possible that Sobakin sold her to some foreign fuck just out of spite.”

“I’m on it, boss.”

“However fast you’re going, speed it up by ten,” I growl. “We don’t have time to waste.”

Correction: *Polly* doesn’t have time to waste.

ALYSSA

Halle-freaking-lujah!

I'm out of the basement at last and freedom tastes so sweet. I wander around the house looking for Nikolai so I can thank him, but he's nowhere in sight. When I ask Svetlana where he is, she says only that he's working and he's going to be away from the house most of the day. I figure the same is true for Uri, because he's nowhere to be seen, either.

I'm not sure how to feel about that. On the one hand, avoiding him seems crucial for my mental sanity. On the other hand, there's an ache for him that I can't seem to kill.

I roam the gardens until my legs get tired. But even when I sit down underneath my favorite oak in the center of the lawn, I can't stop thinking about Lev. He used to keep me company when I was out here, but like his brothers, he's a ghost.

Which is how I end up back in the house, tiptoeing through the hallways, searching for clues that he's okay.

I run into George on the third floor when he steps out of a room with a brass door handle. "Alyssa!" the physical therapist says, his eyes going wide with surprise. "I didn't expect to see you here."

I glance towards the door. "Is Lev in there?"

"He—er—well, yes."

"How's he doing?"

George sighs and crumbles forward. “Good days and bad, I suppose. H-he... asks for you a lot.”

My chest tightens. “Has he been cooped up in his room all day?”

“Try ‘all week.’” George snorts. “He hasn’t stepped foot out of that room since he was brought back to the estate.” He passes a hand over his face and I realize suddenly that he seems impossibly tired. Like he’s holding Lev together with his own bare hands. “The abduction really did a number on him. He doesn’t feel safe anymore. I think staying in there soothes him.”

Oh, the guilt. It’s like a jab to the stomach.

“Can I see him?”

I know I’m probably gonna be in a world of trouble with Uri for even asking, but I can’t just walk away knowing that Lev is hurting. If George turns me down, I’ll walk away and deal with it.

“Well... I probably should clear it with Nikolai or Uri first. But...” I hold my breath. “I’m worried about Lev. He hasn’t regressed this badly before. Maybe seeing you will help.”

“Y-you’re gonna let me in?”

“No.” My heart starts to fall before he adds, “I’m going to go to the kitchen to get some lunch and forget to lock the door behind me. And if someone just so happened to wander in while I was eating my sandwich—very, very slowly—well, then, I’d just have no way of knowing about that.”

Whistling happily, he saunters off down the hall, very determinedly not looking back for even a second. When he rounds the corner and his whistling starts to fade, I turn to the door with the brass handle.

Putting one palm on the cool wood, I push it inward just enough for me to slip through the crack.

The room I walk into is massive. Bigger than the basement, though with almost exactly the same amenities replicated in almost exactly the same spots. The most obvious difference is

the wall of floor-to-ceiling windows. Or rather, that *would* be the most obvious difference, if each and every one of those windows didn't have the blinds drawn tight so no sunlight can sneak through.

I spy a familiar shape on the bed. "Lev?"

He's sitting with his back to me. He jerks violently when he hears my voice. "A-Alyssa?"

I take a tiny, cautious half-step forward. "It's me."

He leaps to his feet and turns to face me. His movements are as slow as mine. It's almost like neither one of us wants to spook the other. His eyes are wide and his jaw is hanging open. For a moment, I wonder if I've done the right thing. Just because he's been asking for me doesn't mean he wants to see me. Doesn't mean he *needs* to see me. Doesn't mean seeing me won't tear his fragile mind to pieces.

"Alyssa," he murmurs again.

"Is it okay that I'm here, Lev?" I ask, gnawing the inside of my cheek. "If it's not, I can go."

His bottom lip quivers a little and then suddenly, he's running full-tilt towards me. He grabs a hold of me, buries his face in the crook of my neck, and starts bawling. I'm reminded of just how big he is. I can barely stay on my feet with his six foot-two frame collapsing down on top of me.

I run a hand down his trembling back again and again. "Hey, Lev, it's okay. It's all gonna be okay."

Words. Just meaningless, useless words that I spew out because I don't know what else to do or say. I don't believe them and I don't know that even he does.

When he settles down a little, I walk him back to the bed and we sit on the edge together. "Are you okay?"

He shakes his head, though I'm not sure if that's a yes or a no. Considering the number of tears on his cheeks, I'm gonna have to go with the latter. I take a tissue and wipe the tears off his face.

"Why d-didn't you come to s-see me?" he blubbers.

“I’m sorry, Lev. I wanted to, but... it’s complicated.”

His frown is heartbreaking. “I thought you were angry with me.”

“No!” I exclaim adamantly. “Of course not. I could never be angry with you.” I take his hand and, while he flinches a little, he doesn’t move out of my grasp. “Why would you even think that?”

“B-b-because... e-everyone is a-a-angry with m-me.”

The stuttering is new, too. It happened before but not so violently or so frequently. I squeeze his hand a little tighter. At least he doesn’t seem to be too uncomfortable with my touch. “Can you take a deep breath for me, Lev? We’ll both breathe together.”

He gives it his best effort and, after a couple of breaths, he seems in a slightly better position to talk. “Okay—now, who else do you think is angry with you, Lev?”

His jaw trembles. “U-Uri.”

I frown. *Uri?* He’s always so patient with Lev. I can’t imagine that that’s changed. But then again, I’ve probably missed a lot while I’ve been trapped down in the basement.

“Uri is angry with you?”

“He says he’s not. B-b-but he doesn’t spend time with me like he u-u-used to. He doesn’t have t-t-time for games. He d-doesn’t even e-e-eat with me a-a-anymore. S-sometimes, he even yells.”

“At you?”

Lev nods. “B-b-but mostly at other p-p-people.”

Guilt. Hot and relentless. So much fucking guilt.

“Listen to me, Lev: no one is angry with you. It’s just that your brother has been under a lot of stress lately. It’s not personal.”

Lev looks at me as though he doesn’t understand. The thing is, *I* do. I understand that Uri is so terrified for his sister that he’s not able to be there for Lev in the same way he used to be.

And he has to be going through a lot if he's dropping the ball with Lev.

But it's not like I can explain why Uri is under so much stress. I have no idea if Lev even knows about Polly's absence. For all I know, Uri might have told Lev that she's back in boarding school. Lev wouldn't question that.

"Hey, do you wanna go for a walk with me?"

His eyes go wide with panic. "No. They'll take me again."

"Who?"

"The bad men."

Ah. There's that guilt again.

"The bad men are gone, Lev," I assure him, though my throat is clogged with emotion. "No one can get through these walls. You're safe now."

He looks skeptical. "I like this room. I want to stay here."

"Please, Lev?" I try. I know pushing him may not be the right thing to do here but I so badly want to help in whatever way I can. "I'll be with you the whole time. I think a walk might do you good."

He looks uncertain. "A small walk...?"

"A small walk, sure. You can hold my hand the entire time. And hey, if we stop by the kitchen, maybe we can have ourselves a cereal feast. What do you think?"

He tilts his head to the side, intrigued. "Okay."

I squeeze his hand and get to my feet. He looks up at me, aimless for a moment before he gets to his feet, too. He cringes against the sunlight when we step into the hallway. It takes him several minutes to adjust to the brightness before we can move downstairs.

Reaching the kitchen feels like a victory. George is in there, slurping noodles out of a bowl. His eyes go wide when he sees me enter with Lev.

"Lev, buddy! You're out of your room."

He sidles a little closer to me. “I didn’t want Alyssa to leave me.”

“I think this calls for a cereal celebration,” I decide, leading Lev over to the chair beside George’s. Once he’s situated, I pull out every kind of cereal the kitchen cabinets have to offer and fill my arms with a stack of bowls. I pour Lev a flight of cereals and we laugh, pretending to be sipping wine and praising the notes of honey and cinnamon and this and that. By the end of it, Lev actually cracks a smile.

George glances at me over Lev’s bent head. *How did you do this?* he mouths at me.

I just shrug and turn my attention to Lev, who’s wolfing down this third bowl. The truth is, I’m not sure how I did it, either.

All I know is that I did something good today.

And *that* feels like freedom.

ALYSSA

It's amazing how quickly the loneliness can set in.

The walk through the garden is uneventful. After Lev goes back up to his room with George, I wander over to the pool and stare at the ripples in the water that the wind is making. It looks so inviting. So does the option of discarding my clothes and jumping in.

My pregnancy feels like it's progressing at an alarming rate. But then, I suppose having twins will do that to you. On the downside, it also makes me uncomfortable in my skin. I'm just not used to the belly or how my breasts seem to have doubled in size in the last week alone.

But I've been caged up for too long—in a basement, in emotional purgatory, in baggy clothes so Uri can't creep on me through the cameras. So now that I've had a taste of fresh air and sunlight, I want to feel those things on my skin.

I pick out one of the bikinis that Uri bought for me ages ago. It's dusky pink and pretty risqué compared to the round-the-clock outfit of sweatpants and a hoodie I've been wearing since my jail sentence in the basement began. But I feel good wearing it. My limbs feel lighter.

And considering I don't expect to see Nikolai or Uri today, it seems like the perfect time to stretch my wings.

The first kiss of water on my skin is borderline orgasmic. Dipping all the way under is like transporting myself to a different world. Down here, it's all aqua-tinged beams of

sunlight and bubbles rising up in frothy columns. It's quiet and cool and there's no violence here.

Just peace. Just calm. Just bliss.

It's when I come back up that I remember my problems are all still waiting for me.

So I duck back down again. Then up. Then down. I spend the better part of the evening in the pool, alternating between periods of relaxed contentment below the surface and periods of complete guilt above it. I hate that I have the option of floating around the pool all day while Polly is God knows where with God knows whom.

By the time darkness settles, I've had my fill of swimming. I'm pruny on my fingers and toes, though a half-hour basking on a lounge chair has me mostly dry.

I'm padding my reluctant way back to the jail cell when my stomach growls. It's only then that I remember I haven't eaten since this morning's breakfast cereal sommelier experience with Lev.

The house is empty and the staff seems intent on avoiding me—per Uri's orders, I'm sure—so I figure it's safe to duck into the kitchen and grab something to eat before heading back downstairs again. Honestly, though, I'll do anything to postpone going down to the basement.

In the kitchen, I whip a sandwich together and shovel half of it down without even bothering to take a seat. I'm waiting for my post-meal cup of herbal tea to finish steeping when I hear footsteps.

Very heavy, very ominous, very recognizable footsteps.

Oh, no.

A second later, Uri shows up at the threshold. He freezes instantly when he sees me. He scans me up and down. I'm instantly longing for my sweatpants and hoodie again.

Not that I should feel embarrassed. My body is changing because of *his* babies.

“Hi. I, um... I was just getting myself some dinner,” I say, with a blush pink enough to blend into my bikini.

He raises his eyebrows. “In your underwear?”

I frown. “This is a swimsuit.”

“The difference is lost on me.”

This is not a hill I’m willing to die on. I clear my throat. “Would you like something to eat? I made myself a sandwich and I can’t finish it all.” He looks reluctant, so I add, “I promise I didn’t poison it.”

His brow furrows. “Fine.”

I take a step out of his way as he walks over to the kitchen island. He’s a sight to see today. Dark charcoal suit, his hair all tousled and wind-swept. Just glancing at him gives me palpitations. All these baby hormones are certainly not helping.

He sits down on one of the bar stools and I put my tea down. I’m painfully aware of how much skin I’m showing. An hour ago, it felt like freedom. Now, it feels like my body is writing checks that my mouth can’t cash.

“Actually, forget the sandwich,” he says abruptly. “Bring me the bottle of vodka from the liquor cabinet over there.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Bad day?”

All he does is grunt in response and look down at his phone. He looks gaunter than I remember. Still handsome, of course, but gaunt. He’s got the hollowed-out cheekbones and dark circles under his eyes that make him the kind of guy a vampire franchise would kill to cast as their leading man.

I bite my bottom lip—because those dark circles are *my* fault. Those bloodshot eyes are *my* fault. The fact that he can’t seem to be there for Lev is my fault, too, and I can’t even be mad at him for any of it. He’s doing his best to be there for everybody. It’s no wonder he’s spread himself too thin.

“Thanks, by the way,” I mumble. “For letting me out of the basement.”

He doesn't so much as glance up from his phone. "Mm" is his only response.

He might be doing it deliberately. Punishing me with his indifference, his lack of interest. This is the first time I'm seeing him since Dr. Grigory confirmed my pregnancy and told us that I was having twins.

But Uri makes no mention of it. He doesn't even seem to notice my belly.

Of course, the moment I turn my back on him and walk towards the cabinet where the glasses are stored, I can feel his eyes on me, hot and scathing. I glance towards the microwave embedded into the wall and as I do, I catch his reflection on the surface.

His face is shadowy. But those eyes... they're brighter than ever.

Swallowing hard, I grab a glass and the bottle of vodka and walk it back to the center island. I pour him a serving and pass it over. The whole time, I feel his eyes following my every movement.

"Here you go," I say, setting it down in front of him.

I'm so close that the side of my breast brushes against his arm. He flinches as though I've just electrocuted him. When I glance down, I realize with a jolt that he's hard.

He follows my eyes and sees what I'm looking at. Then his entire face changes. That intense heat in his eyes goes ice-cold like he flipped a switch. His jaw clenches tight, sealing up that tempting sliver of darkness between his lips.

"Fucking hell," he mutters under his breath as he shoves himself off the stool hard enough for it to tip and go clattering on the ground.

I cringe and cower away instinctively. He looks so impossibly *huge*, rising up above me like that with his eyes stormy and his fists balled up tight.

For one wild moment, I think he's going to kiss me.

His eyes churn with conflict. And just when I think he's about to lean in, he storms off, leaving his drink untouched on the counter in front of me.

URI

What does she think she's playing at?

It's a rhetorical question. It's pretty obvious what Alyssa is trying to do. Seduce me with those hazel bright eyes of hers. Lure me in with those seductive lips and the curves of her changing body. Her breasts have at least doubled in size since I last saw them.

Or felt them...

Fuck.

I've been pacing for twenty minutes since retreating into my office and my erection still hasn't gone down. It looks like it's not going to budge until I do something about it.

I lean over the desk and grip the side as I unzip my pants to release my cock. When I do, it jumps out eagerly, clearly having missed the memo that Alyssa is completely off-limits now.

This is not good. Not good at all.

When I agreed to give her freedom of the house, this is not what I'd had in mind. The point was to run into her sometimes, sure. But it was going to be on *my* terms. *I* was the one who would call the shots. *I* was the one who would have control.

But considering I'm leaning over my desk now with my cock in my hand, that plan seems dead on arrival.

“Fuck,” I growl ferociously as I start pumping at my dick while trying simultaneously to push her out of my head.

It’s next to impossible, considering all I can see is pink. *That fucking bikini.* I remember picking it out for her. Daydreaming even then of how good it would feel to rip the thing right off her so I could devour a part of her throbbing in a matching dusky pink...

But that was before she’d betrayed me and caused half my family to be abducted. You’d think that would kill my desire for her. But the desire is still real.

It’s a curse.

Her entire body was on display downstairs. The bikini bottom was just small enough that I could see the curves of her ass peeking out at me. The top was even smaller and not nearly enough to hold her growing breasts. How is a man supposed to enjoy an evening drink with *that* in front of him?

I fist myself harder, gritting my teeth as new jolts of pleasure rush through my body. Every single jolt is directly connected to her.

She clearly dressed for me. She was clearly waiting for me—waiting for a reaction, a jab, a spark of pain in my eyes. It was easy enough to resist... until she brought me my drink like a dutiful little wife. Placed it down right in front of me, with a self-conscious smile that was begging for attention.

That was strike one.

Strike two came when she brushed up against me. It wasn’t even skin on skin and yet it was still the most erotic thing I’ve felt in weeks.

I grip the edge of the table tighter as I start pumping harder. If it weren’t for the fact that I can’t afford to lose this battle, I’d have hurled that damn drink into the wall, lifted her onto the counter, shoved those insolent bikini bottoms to the side, and fucked the life out of her.

I would’ve—

My God. I grit my teeth as the orgasm comes. I can hear her phantom moans in my ears, ringing louder and louder until the climax consumes me.

I make a mess of my hand as I erupt. The satisfaction lasts a few blissful minutes before it fades back into annoyance.

Alyssa accomplished exactly what she set out to do tonight: she got under my skin.

Well, if she wants to play games, I'll show her that I can play games, too.

And when I play... I *always* win.



The next morning, I'm sitting at the kitchen island with a freshly brewed cup of coffee when she walks in. Just as I suspected, she's dressed for attention.

Neon-green bikini that barely covers her tits.

String bottoms that barely cover her ass.

And a see-through cover-up that doesn't cover up a goddamn thing.

My hand tightens around my mug but I refuse to give her more than a spare glance. She can push those breasts up all the way to fucking Canada—I'm not going to cave.

"Good morning," she chimes. I grunt in response and continue scrolling through the news on my phone. "Have you had breakfast yet?"

"Not hungry."

She opens the fridge and pulls out the homemade scones that the chefs prepared yesterday. The kitchen staff tend to disappear the moment I appear. It's a well-oiled system we've got going on.

"You need to eat."

"I said I'm not hungry."

She's left her hair loose. It tumbles down her shoulders in messy ways that are begging to be yanked up in my fist so I can expose the curve of her neck and pass my tongue over every inch of her.

She sighs. "I can smell your coffee from here."

"Is it making you nauseous?" I drawl. "Because if that's the case, the door's right there."

The asshole in me is in fine form today. Mostly because I masturbated to her twice last night and totaled about four hours of choppy sleep in between five cups of the strongest black coffee known to man.

"It doesn't have to be this hard, you know," she says softly.

I have to suppress a snort. We're not playing Freudian mind games in this house. Not as long as I'm still in charge.

Well, *I'm* not playing them.

Alyssa, it seems, wants to continue. "If you're not gonna sleep, you can at least eat something substantial."

She goes back to the fridge and bends low at the waist to grab something from the bottom drawer. Despite the fact that I've rubbed two out in the last twelve hours, I'm rock hard in five seconds flat.

She starts putting together a plate for me. To a neutral observer, it'd seem that she's oblivious to how she's practically naked in my kitchen. Ha—*oblivious*, my ass.

The woman knows exactly what she's doing.

Mischa, one of the members of the gardening crew, walks past the French doors and does a double take when he sees Alyssa. He's so engrossed in ogling her that he doesn't even notice me sitting here.

If Alyssa notices her admirer, she pretends not to. She simply goes about the kitchen, putting together a plate I never asked for, pleading for attention in those invisible scraps she calls a bathing suit.

So much for the shy kitten I once thought she was.

I hold out for as long as I can, but the moment Miguel licks his lips, I snap. I jerk to my feet and that gets his attention. He goes beet red and then he pales just as fast. He trips twice in his hurry to get the fuck away from the window and away from the consequences of ogling my woman.

My woman?

Fuck.

I might be losing this morning's battle.

"Here," Alyssa says at last, pushing a plate of breakfast breads towards me. "Eat. You'll feel better afterwards."

I grab her arm and twist her towards me. "What will make me feel better is if you go and put on some actual fucking clothes. Do you really think I'm going to let my woman traipse around the house dressed like a whore?"

She flinches, leaning away from me as far as I'll allow. "Except that I'm not your woman. You've made that pretty damn clear."

I lean in so that she can't escape my scowl. "You're whatever I say you are." Then I push her back so that her spine hits the kitchen island. She can probably feel the cold marble through that threadbare slip she's wearing. It really doesn't serve any purpose.

Apart from making me hard, that is.

"I'm onto you, *narushitel*. This siren act you've got going on is not—" I slip my hand down into her bikini bottoms and she gasps, pulsing hard against my hand. "—going to work."

She bites her bottom lip, her starved eyes staring up at me as though she's desperate for relief. And *fuck*, do I know the feeling. She's wet when I slip my finger inside her and start playing with her clit. She never takes her eyes off me as the moans start to drip off her tongue.

"You like that, don't you?" Her eyes seem to quiver. "Answer me." She pulls in a sharp breath and nods meekly. I shake my head. "Not good enough. I need to hear you."

"I... I like that."

“Been dreaming of my cock now, have you?”

“U-Uri... ahh.”

Her eyes clamp shut and her lips part. I’m desperate to lean in, take a bite out of that plump lip. But I know if I kiss her...

I’m never going to stop.

She lets me keep going. We stare, her at me and me at her, our breath caught in our throats and the air around us getting hotter and hotter and Alyssa’s pussy getting wetter and wetter and tighter and tighter around my fingers. Her lips are spreading, her pupils blowing wide open. I can smell her desire and feel every ounce of blood pumping into my cock as we both ride the wave higher and higher and higher still.

I wait until she’s right at the pinnacle of orgasm—before I rip my hand out of those neon green bottoms. Alyssa’s eyes startle open, surprise written all over her face.

“Not today, little *narushitel*,” I snarl. “You don’t get to win today.”

Then I spin around and walk away before I have to eat my own words.

ALYSSA

I'll give him this: no one does humiliation quite like Uri Bugrov.

I stand there in my bikini and gaze stupidly at the empty space he just vacated a moment ago. I'm trying to catch my breath and get my bearings, while also trying *not* to feel like a complete fool.

I'm losing on all three counts.

You don't get to win today, he spat in my face. What does winning or losing have to do with any of this? It figures that Uri would assume that I'm playing some sort of game. That my attempts to comfort and take care of him were misconstrued as a ploy to seduce him. He just isn't used to people being nice to him without a reason, without some ulterior motive or the other—probably because *he* doesn't do nice things without getting something in return.

Then again, I *did* have an ulterior motive, didn't I?

But mine was simple.

I just wanted him to *look* at me.

I pull my robe tighter around my torso and look around to see if anyone saw what just happened. I hate that he's made me feel so self-conscious about my body, about myself. The neon green bikini that made me feel so sexy and alive this morning looks cheap and trashy in the wake of his scorn.

But right on the heels of that shame comes anger.

Where does *he* get off not trusting *me*? *He's* the one who locked me in his basement and refused to let me go! I've almost certainly lost my freelance gig at the magazine. I've *definitely* missed my best friend's wedding. My parents are probably either pissed off or scared shitless that they haven't heard from me in an alarmingly long time.

And after all that, he expects *my* trust?

Get. Fucking. Real.

I storm off towards the basement. I don't want the bright sunlight of the pool deck anymore. What I want is a dark, quiet place to lick my wounds and take stock of all my poor life decisions.

Mistake number one was buying those damn sex toys. If I hadn't gotten so giggly about a purple tentacle dildo, none of this would've ever happened.

Mistake number two—thinking that cosplaying as a freaking ninja-slash-Seal-Team-Six-member was a good idea.

I rip off my mesh cover-up the moment I get down to the basement and fling it to the floor like a petulant little brat having a temper tantrum—which, truth be told, isn't that far off the mark. I'm reaching back to undo my top ties when something strikes me.

What if Uri is watching?

Almost as soon as I have the thought, something inside me snaps. *Let him watch. Let him stare at my naked body and lie to himself about wanting it.*

I get a delicious sense of satisfaction in imagining Uri sitting at his desk in the office, watching me on the screen. He was hard last night and he was hard this morning when he had his fingers inside of me.

He may get off on torturing me by denying me pleasure...

But two can play at that game.

I peel my bikini top off first. Next goes the bottoms, slow and smooth with a crisp bend at the waist for full effect. Once I'm completely naked, I crawl on all fours onto my bed and lie

down flat, making sure to position myself at the optimal angle for the camera. Just enough for him to see my body, to wonder what sights he might be missing by staying stubbornly a whole floor away from me.

I spread my thighs and float my hand down between them.

The more I think about it, the more I decide that Nikolai is right: the only reason Uri's trying so hard to punish me is because he still cares about me. And he hates that he does. He hates it so much that it eats up at him from the inside, like battery acid in his veins. So he lashes out every chance he gets, just to make me feel what he feels.

Well, I'm done being his punching bag. If I'm forced to stay in this basement, in his house—then I'm going to make sure he can't ignore me.

I arch my back and start touching myself a little more aggressively. I put on a show for the cameras, letting my moans fly free.

Take that, Uri Bugrov.

I'm just relaxing into things when I hear thundering footsteps just outside the basement door. *Well, well, well. Someone is punctual.*

Sure enough, he storms in, all indignant rage, his eyes blazing when they land on me. I don't bother to stop. I don't even sit up. I just grab a breast and tweak the nipple while my other hand circles my clit slowly.

His face looms over me but I refuse to be embarrassed. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he hisses.

"If you can't tell, then you're even more clueless than I thought," I murmur through parted lips. "You couldn't finish the job. So I'm going to."

"Couldn't?" he balks. "The word is 'wouldn't.'"

I shrug as best as I can manage with my fingers inside me. "Whatever. The point is, I can get off. With or without you."

He shakes his head. "Bull-fucking-shit. You're not doing this for yourself; you're doing this to get my attention."

“Ahh... *fuck*, that feels good...”

His jaw clenches. “You want me to fuck you, is that it?” That glint in his eye reminds me of the look an addict gets just before they cave. “You want me to treat you like a slut that I can use whenever the hell I please?”

His words sting—but fuck it, let them; I refuse to let him derail my determination. The fact that he’s here in the first place proves that I still have some power over him. For a man who’s extremely insistent on reminding me that he doesn’t give a shit about me anymore, he spends an awful lot of his free time watching my every move.

Something about that is not adding up.

“I’m not going to try to change your mind about me, Uri. You believe what you believe. In the meantime, I may as well get mine... Ahh, that feels so...”

His eyes are daggers, ready to impale me. It’s entirely possible I’ve overplayed my hand and he’s just going to walk out and slam the door on me. Probably rescind his decision to give me freedom of the house. All a consequence of that neon green bikini.

I’m too worked up to care. My body is piled high with emotion—desire, passion, anger, frustration, the stubborn zeal to give as good as I’ve gotten. Any one of them will do in a pinch.

“Stop it,” he growls in a low voice dipped in desire.

I meet his eyes and curl my lips up in a teasing smirk. “Make me.”

“*Blyat*’,” he snarls as he practically rips his belt off. Within seconds, he’s naked, too, his body covering mine.

His skin feels like silk wrapped over a boulder. I shudder against him, welcoming the warmth. His erection is pressed against my thigh. I have just enough time to get my fingers out of my soaking slit before he grabs me by the hips and twists me around. He forces me onto all fours and then his cock thrusts inside me, relentless and rough.

I cry out at the aggression of that first thrust. But for as forceful as the first one felt, it's nothing compared to what comes after.

He fucks me with so much power that I'm afraid my eyeballs will pop right out of my head. It really does feel like he's a man possessed. And I'm pretty sure I'm the possessor. Which is what gives me the courage to crawl further onto the bed, forcing him out of me.

I twist around before he can grab me. "No," I say firmly. "I don't want it like that. I want to look at you."

His eyes flash before he narrows them. "It doesn't matter what you want. I'll take you however I want."

He plants his hand on my hip but he doesn't force me back down. As confidence pools in my chest, I turn the tables—I rise up and push *him* down onto the bed and mount him quickly. I grab his cock, raise my hips, and drop down on top of him, swallowing his cock with my pussy.

A surprised breath escapes from his lips. His hands are heavy on my waist, but he doesn't throw me off.

I look him in the eyes as I start rocking my hips back and forth. "You want to be angry at me because you need someone to blame? Fine. I get it. But don't think for one second that I believe you hate me. You *love* me and it's fucking killing you." The truth is, I have no idea if that's accurate or not. But I'm on a high and the words are flying out of my mouth faster than I can process them. "So you can do what you want with me. Treat me like your whore if it suits you. Fuck me as you please. Just be a man and have the balls to *look* at me while you do it."

His eyes churn as he leans up and grabs my ass. I ride him just as hard as he fucked me. Even when my lungs feel like they're about to burst and my legs start cramping, I keep going. I wait until I feel his body tighten and then I just ride him harder.

Everything gets faster and sweatier and tighter and hotter until *boom*, he explodes inside me. I milk that orgasm dry and come

right along with him, twitching and gasping until my own orgasm has settled.

But the moment my hips stop moving, Uri shoves me off him unceremoniously. He's up instantly, reaching for his clothes, avoiding my eyes. Within seconds, he's walking out the door without so much as a goodbye.

The high I was riding—literally and figuratively—comes to a crashing halt. My insides quiver with unease as I grab the sheets and tuck them around me. I can feel the tears coming but I bite them down. If he decides to go back and watch the monitor, I do *not* want him to see me cry.

So I curl up in bed and cover my face with a pillow, finding whatever solace I can underneath the comfort and warmth of the covers. Somewhere in the middle of my chaotic thoughts and my hurt feelings, I drift off with the lights on.



A sharp pain and a stickiness down between my legs has me bolting upright, ripped from my dreams. I don't mind so much—my dreams aren't what they used to be.

I pull off the covers and look down between my legs, expecting to see the streaked signs of Uri's cum painting me as his.

Instead, I see blood.

That's when I start to scream.

URI

Even the vodka isn't helping.

Usually, I can count on it to dull my senses, sand down my feelings, suck the harsh color out of everything in my life that I'm trying to escape from. It's been the secret elixir that's gotten me through the hardest moments in life.

But vodka is no match for the force of nature that is Alyssa Walsh.

What just happened?

I played right into her hands, that's what. I promised myself I'd never lose control and then, like the same sick dope fiend hunting for his next fix, I turned that damn monitor on again and watched her strip naked.

I never thought of a pregnant woman as remotely sexual before. But watching her pull off that top, I realized that a pregnant woman is nothing *but* sexual.

Especially if she's carrying *your* babies.

I resisted—right up until she started touching herself. Then all bets were off. My brain shut down. I went into autopilot mode. My instincts took over and before I knew it, I was marching down to the basement without a plan or any sense of control.

Now, I'm back in my seat, staring at the dark monitor that I'm refusing to turn back on as punishment for my weakness. My cock is still wet with her juices. My body slick with her sweat. I can taste her on my tongue and smell her on my skin. Even

when she's not with me, she's everywhere, all over me, inside and out.

"Fuck!" I yell, slamming my fist down on the table.

Why can't I get my shit together with this woman? She's no good for me. She got my brother kidnapped. She got my sister sold. So why the fuck can't I stay away from her?

Maybe because you don't really blame her for what happened at all.

I push that voice away. What do I have if I don't have my anger? What do I do if I don't have a scapegoat to blame?

My door slams open and one of my security personnel, Chekhov, appears on the threshold looking damp and out of breath. I get to my feet immediately. No one just barges into my office unless there's a damn good reason.

"What is it?"

"Boss, I heard a scream from inside the basement. I went in to check and—"

I don't wait for him to finish. The look on his face is all I need to know that something has gone very wrong. I'm already running down the hall towards the basement, pushing past everything and everyone in my way.

When I blow into the basement, I find Alyssa sitting in a pool of blood, staring down, staring at her bloody thighs in confusion.

"Alyssa."

Her eyes lift to mine. "I... I think I'm losing the babies," she chokes out.

I grit my teeth. "Not if I have anything to say about it." I scoop her into my arms and turn towards the door. "Chekhov! Get one of the SUVs ready and call Dr. Popov. We're heading to the hospital."

She feels unbearably light in my arms. She doesn't move or fidget as I carry her upstairs. Her head falls against my chest

as though the effort of keeping it upright is just too much for her.

I keep her on my lap through the whole ride to the hospital. The slip she's wearing has mopped up some of the blood, so I'm hoping that it looks a whole lot worse than it is. Every so often, I can feel the moisture from her tears soak into my shirt.

"It's gonna be okay," I tell her softly. "You're gonna be okay."

She doesn't say a word. Her face is paler than I've ever seen it and the eight-minute drive to the hospital is the longest of my life. I bark at Chekhov twice to drive faster and then I curse at him for driving too fast.

My chest feels tight. It's like every beat is costing me something. Looking down at her doesn't help a goddamn thing. She just looks so sad... so lost.

I would give anything to make sure she's alright. I would literally kill if it means I could save her.

She's loaded onto a gurney when we get to St. Mary's Memorial and rolled into one of the emergency rooms. I follow her in and bark at a nurse who tells me that I need to stay out. It isn't until I see Emily that I calm down a little.

"Uri," she says urgently, rushing over to me, "I'm gonna take care of her, okay? But you need to wait out here."

"No," I growl. "I'm coming in."

"That wouldn't be helpful. I can't look after you and help Alyssa at the same time. Now, please, stay here and I'll send a nurse with an update."

She has to physically push me out of the room. I spend the next half-hour pacing the corridor outside the emergency room like a caged animal, my thoughts going haywire.

*Is this my fault? Is my anger going to cost me Alyssa's trust?
Will my pride cost me my unborn children?*

But no matter how many times I ask the questions or how many laps I do in the lobby, there are no answers to be found.



“Uri.”

I whip around to see Emily. I hadn’t even noticed her exit the emergency room. “Is she okay?”

She gives me a reassuring smile. “She’s fine. Stable for now. Everything looks good.”

“Everything?” I repeat. “Does that mean...?”

“The babies are good, too. There was some fetal distress, but I managed to get in there in time. Alyssa and the babies are all going to be fine.”

The relief that floods my body is so powerful that I have to sit down for a second. Emily follows me to the chairs set up against the wall and takes the seat next to me.

“She’s being moved to a room in the ward. You’ll be able to see her there in a few minutes.”

I nod. “Thank you.”

She puts her hand on my shoulder. “Uri... we’re not joking when we say that pregnant women need to avoid stress during their pregnancies. She needs to be in a state of calm if she’s going to carry those children to term. And you have to help with that.”

“I know. Fuck, I know.”

“Good. I won’t lecture you anymore. Now, take a deep breath and go and see your family.”

Family. That word puts shit into perspective, whether I like it or not. It also forces me to come to another realization, one that I’ve been trying to avoid for some time now.

When Chekhov appeared at my door, when I saw the blood, when I carried Alyssa into my arms and brought her here... my first and only thoughts were for *her*. I was worried about the babies, of course, but my primary concern was for her.

Fuck.

Once I've taken the breath that Emily advised, I make my way to the ward where Alyssa was moved. She's lying on the bed, hooked up to a machine that's reading her pulse and pressure. She still looks pale and fragile. But her eyes are cracked open a fraction—searching. Hoping.

“Alyssa,” I rasp, sweeping towards her bedside.

I've been a fool. I've been a brute and an asshole. I've blamed her for *my* mistakes, *my* shortcomings.

I've blamed *her* for the fact that I can't seem to get her out of my head or my heart.

It may have taken the risk of losing her to make me realize it, but at least I can see the light now. It's time to stop being the childish thug I have been. It's time to make things right.

It's time to man the fuck up and protect what's mine.

URI

Alyssa's eyes settle on me hazily. She blinks a couple of times as though she can't be sure that I'm standing in front of her. I don't blame her—she has no reason to believe I'd be here to hold her hand in the aftermath.

I step closer and lower my face to hers. "You're alright. So are the babies."

"Both?" she murmurs.

"Both."

She closes her eyes so tight that it squeezes the tears out. When she opens them again, she lets out a deep breath. The color on her cheeks eases with the inhale. =

"How do you feel?" I ask.

"Scared," she admits. "Relieved. Nervous. Worried. All of the above."

"Don't be. Emily knows what she's doing. She said you'd be fine and I believe her."

"I don't know what happened. One minute, I was okay and the next thing I knew, I was bleeding all over the sheets..."

I take her hand and her eyes snap down. She looks startled by the contact. "It was my fault," I say softly. "I should have put all my energy into making you feel safe and calm. Instead, I chose to punish you for something that was never your fault."

Her eyes go wide. She stares at me silently for a long time. "Am I... dreaming?"

I wince. “No. You’re not.” I squeeze her hand just to prove it.

Another tear rolls down her cheek. “Do you really mean that?”

“Yes. I know this is too little, too late, but I’m sorry for everything I said to you. About Polly. About Lev, too. I know your intention was never to cause them harm.”

Her bottom lip trembles. “I care about both of them a lot, you know.”

“I do know that.”

“And you didn’t have to blame me. I blame myself.”

“Alyssa—”

“No.” Her words stumble over a sob but she keeps going anyway. “I should never have involved Polly. It was asking too much of a fourteen-year-old. And Lev... I should have left him behind. I should have stayed put when he insisted on following me.”

I shake my head. “It’s not your fault, Alyssa. I know that will be hard for you to accept from me because of how often I threw blame at your feet, but I can only say that I was wrong. I was angry and scared and I felt helpless. I’m not used to feeling helpless.”

Her irises are lost behind a haze of unshed tears. “I want you to know that I would do anything to take her place.” My body rejects the very idea, but I don’t interrupt her. “I asked the Russians to take me instead. I *begged* them. But they just took Polly and left.”

I glance towards the monitors. Her pressure is climbing steadily. “Listen to me,” I say, engulfing her hand in both of mine. “You did what you could. This is not your fault, Alyssa. I’ll repeat it as many times as I need to until you believe me.”

She swallows. Her throat looks so delicate and vulnerable with the motion, with all these wires running into her and machines chirping on all sides. “Polly was the first person I told.”

My eyebrows pull together. “About what?”

“The babies,” she explains, glancing off towards the window as though she’s watching a play-by-play of the memory. “Well... baby. I didn’t know I was having twins at the time.”

“You told her?”

“She was losing hope in that cell. I could see her fading away right before my eyes. I needed to keep her talking. I did—for a while. But the longer they kept us there... It was so cold, Uri. And they fed our food to the rats just to taunt us. I could see her giving up. I just wanted to give her some hope. Something to look forward to.”

My jaw clenches viciously tight, but I keep my expression neutral. The worry should be mine alone from now on. But her recounting of the capture reminds me of the fact that I never asked for her experience. I never bothered to find out what she went through. I pushed aside her trauma in favor of my own. I pretended that none of it touched her because it was easier than admitting that she was just as much of a victim as Polly was.

So many mistakes. I could drown in them. Hell, I *am* drowning in them.

“What did she say?”

“She was happy—I think...” Alyssa whispers. Her eyes flutter closed for a moment. “She was excited about being an aunt. *Goddammit*, I wish I remembered more. It’s just... the memory of those few days... They’re so murky. It’s like trying to remember a dream. I’d forgotten I told Polly that I was pregnant until just now.”

“Don’t put pressure on yourself. It’ll come when it’s ready to.”

Alyssa just shakes her head. “But... we don’t have that kind of time. Polly—”

“Polly is a Bugrov through and through. She’s a hell of a lot more capable than you think. She’ll be okay until I find her. And I *will* find her, Alyssa. I promise you that.”

Another heartbreaking tear rolls down her cheek. “If anything happens to her... I’ll never forgive myself.”

“You’ll have to, Alyssa,” I tell her gently. “You’ll have to forgive yourself for the sake of those babies you’re carrying. I know I have no right to ask this of you anymore... but I need you to trust me.” Her eyes have gone foggy and I wonder if she’s getting everything I’m saying. “Let me worry about getting Polly back and you focus on keeping those babies healthy and strong.”

She nods. “I-I’ll try.”

Her eyelids dip; her blood pressure recedes ever-so-slightly. Like her body is saying that all she needed from me was just a little bit of comfort. Just a little bit of kindness.

I’ve never been good at either, except for when it came to family. But it’s becoming more and more clear to me the longer I stay by her bedside, watching her sleep...

Alyssa *is* family now.

The little *narushitel* stole more than a package from my doorstep—she stole her way into a world I thought I’d walled off forever.

So yes, she’s family. She’s loved. She’s one of us. And now that I’ve made peace with that—late, but better than never—I need to dig deep and focus all my energy and resources on getting Polly back.

Before the darkness swallows her forever.

ALYSSA

Uri looks at me differently now. The *I-wish-I'd-never-laid-eyes-on-you* look has officially been replaced. Now, his expression borders on *you-are-not-to-lift-a-finger-without-my-permission-first*.

Honestly, I'm not sure which is worse.

"What do you need?" he demands the moment I straighten up and reach behind me.

"I just want to adjust the pillow," I say calmly.

"I can do that for you. Next time, just ask."

I suppress a smile and let him adjust my pillow. He doesn't place it exactly right but if I try to do it myself, he's probably gonna burst a blood vessel. So I just shimmy in place until the pillow obeys.

"When can we go home?" He shoots me a quick glance that makes me feel immediately self-conscious, so I rephrase. "Er, what I mean is, when are we going back to your place?"

"The moment Emily clears you."

"Where is she, by the way?" I ask. "Wasn't she supposed to do her rounds an hour ago?"

"That's the annoying thing about doctors," Uri growls. "They have other patients."

"I thought she was the official Bratva doctor. That doesn't translate to exclusivity?"

He snorts. “You would think, but Emily’s always been a bleeding heart. She likes to volunteer here whenever she has the spare time. Which is currently pissing me the fuck off.”

“Uri,” I say, reaching out and catching his arm, “leave it. It’s not like I’m in pain or anything. Just bored.”

“Boredom is a kind of pain.” The corners of his mouth turn up slightly. It’s the closest thing to a smile I’ve seen from him in days. No—*weeks*. I’d almost forgotten just how handsome he is when he smiles. Those blue eyes seem to get so much bluer.

“Are you comfortable?”

It’s the third time he’s asked me that in the last hour alone. “Yes, I am. *Very* comfortable.”

I already know he’s going to follow up with his other favorite question: *Can I get you anything?* But before he can get to it, the door swings open and Dr. Popov walks in with her clipboard in hand.

“What the *fuck*, Em?”

She stops short at Uri’s bark, her eyes going wide. “What’s wrong?”

“You were supposed to be here to check on her forty minutes ago.”

She exhales. “Jesus, Uri—I have other patients here, you know. One of them went into labor. Emergency Cesarean.”

Uri rolls his eyes. “You couldn’t have fobbed off the job on some other schmuck?”

“*Uri*,” I snap before turning to Emily. “Ignore him. I was happy to wait.”

Pursing her lips, Emily gives Uri an amused glance and floats over to my bedside. “How are we feeling today, my love?”

I’m getting really sick of that question.

“Fine. I feel fine. A little tired, but that’s to be expected.”

Emily consults her clipboard. “Okay, so everything’s looking good. You’re definitely cleared to leave today. However—”

“‘However’?” I interrupt before she can finish. “‘However’ is not good!”

Uri grabs my hand and gives it a little squeeze. It’s amazing how fast that tiny gesture succeeds in calming me down.

“No need to panic. This is just something you need to be aware of,” Emily reassures me, looking between Uri and me. “The scans show that your babies are sharing a placenta. That’s totally normal for identical twins, but it does mean that we will need to monitor you closely going forward. Especially considering the recent episode that brought you here.”

“Is this a reason for concern?”

“Not at all,” Emily insists. “It just means you need to be careful. Take it easy. Put your feet up. Avoid stress at all costs.”

I snort through my nose. “Yeah, okay.”

“Alyssa.” The seriousness in her voice catches my attention. She looks me dead in the eye. “I mean it.”

I nod. “Okay. I hear you.” The only problem is actually executing her advice. It’s all well and good for people to tell me to relax. It’s a whole other ballgame *actually* relaxing.

Especially when nothing is resolved. Lev is still confined to his upstairs room, suffering from nightmares when the sun’s down and a boatload of daytime traumas. Polly is still missing. And I have no idea what’s going on between Uri and me.

“Is bed rest necessary?” Uri inquires.

I look up at him with alarm. Is he serious? I’ve already been going crazy down in that basement. Now, he’s trying to prevent me from leaving the *bed*. Oh, *hell* no!

“Bed rest is drastic,” Emily demurs quickly, probably having noticed the panic on my face. She gives me a little wink. “We don’t need to resort to that just yet. Alyssa is young and healthy. A little light exercise might actually do her and the babies good. By ‘exercise,’ I mean, like, a walk around the garden twice a day. That should do it.”

“Okay. And what about sex? Is that advisable in her condition?”

My jaw drops, but Uri doesn't show the slightest trace of discomfort. You'd never know the man hated my guts just a few days ago.

“Sex is fine,” Emily confirms with a nod. “Just nothing too wild or strenuous. We don't want to shock the system.” She clears her throat and stands. “Okay, I'm gonna sign off on the release paperwork. I've also scheduled another appointment for next week to make sure things are progressing smoothly. Until then, take care of yourself. If you experience any more bleeding or pain, call me immediately.”

“Got it. Thanks.”

Emily gives me a reassuring smile. “You're gonna be fine, Alyssa. Trust me, in a couple of months, you're gonna be bouncing two beautiful healthy babies in your arms and all this will feel like a distant, annoying dream.”

And just like that, I picture it. Me, lying in a hospital bed just like this one, trying to juggle two babies and the growing realization that I am forever tied to Uri Bugrov and the world he lives in.

For better or for worse.

Jesus.

I may be in way over my head.



I've found myself in a new room on the first floor of the house. It's got big French doors that are thrown open in the morning so I can walk out onto my own private patio, complete with a sitting area and a bench swing. After the darkness of the basement, I'm surrounded constantly by light. It's a blessing.

I'm also surrounded by Uri, who has taken it upon himself to be my constant caregiver through what's left of this pregnancy.

Despite me being more than capable of doing everyday things without effort, Uri seems to think otherwise. He took Emily's "take it easy" to mean "*Alyssa is handicapped and cannot be trusted to so much as sneeze without assistance.*" The man barked at me yesterday for trying to open a jar of macadamia nuts without his supervision.

Still, as annoying as his constant hovering can be, it's a huge improvement from the dark days of the basement, when we mostly communicated in arguments and he looked at me as though I was some parasitic scourge that invaded his life.

I might actually dare to feel some occasional twinges of happiness if it weren't for Polly still missing.

"Where are you going?"

I freeze halfway to the bathroom. "I just... need to pee."

"You shouldn't be on your feet."

I plant my fists on my hips. "I'm not about to pee on the sofa, Uri."

He sighs as though I'm the unreasonable one here. "Here, let me help you."

He takes two strides towards me and the next thing I know, I'm being lifted into his arms. *What the hell?!* I decide to direct that thought at Uri. "Uri, what the hell?"

He walks me into the bathroom, which is big enough to include a walk-in shower the size of my first apartment, a massive bathtub-slash-jacuzzi that faces the garden, and a two-person sink.

"Do you need help getting your underwear off?"

I glare at him. "I didn't even need your help getting in here in the first place. Now, put me down!"

He puts me down right in front of the toilet like I'm a three-year-old who's just learned to use the potty. *Oh, the indignity.*

"Let me—"

"If you try to take my pants off, I'm gonna kick you in the nuts." Luckily for him, he makes the very sensible decision

not to smile. “Seriously, Uri. You’re being ridiculous. I’m pregnant, not disabled.”

“Svetlana mentioned that you threw up this morning.”

That little bitch. “Svetlana needs to mind her own damn business,” I snap. Then I take a deep breath. “I threw up *once* this morning and that was it. Morning sickness is normal, you know.”

“It’s normal in the first trimester.”

“Actually, for some women, it can last through all three. It’s no reason to be concerned. It’s just normal pregnancy stuff. I wish you would relax.”

I’m not sure he’s listening to a word I’m saying, if the stubborn clench of his jaw is anything to go by. “Your blood pressure was high this morning.”

I groan. “It was *slightly* higher than yesterday. It’s not a big deal.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

“Not sure *you* are the most impartial judge.” I make myself take a deep, steadying breath. “Uri, I’m fine. I feel better than I have in ages and I’m pretty sure that’ll translate to the babies, too.”

“Have you taken your prenatal vitamins for the day?”

I roll my eyes. “I’m sure Svetlana would have reported back to you if I hadn’t.”

He smirks and bows out. “I’ll leave you to pee in peace then.”

“Thank God.”

The moment I shut the door on him, I drop the scowling act and start smiling. Sure, he can be overbearing. He’s definitely overprotective right now. But I get the sense that this is his way of trying to make amends.

And honestly? I don’t mind it that much. I’ll take *breathing down my neck* Uri over *I hate your fucking guts* Uri any day.

Now, if only we can get Polly back... life might just approach something resembling normal. Happy. Healthy, even.

Wouldn't that be something?

ALYSSA

“We’ve got a lead,” Uri announces as he bursts into my room. He stops abruptly when he sees Nikolai sitting opposite me on bed, cards splayed over the sheets.

I put down my hand of cards. “A lead? About Polly?”

Nikolai gets to his feet. “What have you heard? Who from?”

Uri doesn’t answer right away. His eyes veer from me to Nikolai, crinkled with suspicion. “Kruger just called. A girl matching Polly’s description was seen in an underground sex club in Beverly Hills.”

“Are you heading over there?” Nikolai asks. “Or should I?”

Uri glances towards me. “Someone needs to stay with Alyssa.”

“No, Uri—I’ll be fine on my own. There’s a house full of staff and I still haven’t visited Lev today. Both of you can go.”

“No.”

“You stay then,” Nikolai decides, dropping his cards onto the bed. “I’ll—”

Uri cuts him off. “No. The two of you look pretty cozy here anyway. I’ll let you know if it leads to something.”

He whips away before either Nikolai or I can say another word. “Weirdo,” I mutter under my breath.

Nikolai, however, seems less amused and more... anxious? He doesn’t sit back down on the bed. Instead, he drops into an

armchair and sets his chin in his palm, murmuring something I can't make out under his breath.

I watch him for a while as his eyes churn with thoughts. "What's the deal between the two of you?" I ask bluntly.

"Nothing."

"You sound like a teenage boy."

"I am, at heart."

"Cut the shit, Nikolai. I'm pregnant, not stupid. You're avoiding the question."

He sighs. "We're brothers," he says simply. "Some days, we love each other. Some days, we hate each other. It's just normal brother stuff."

I'm guessing there's a lot more to it than that but Nikolai doesn't seem eager to go there. So I don't push him. Especially because I'm grateful for how amazing he's been with me the last few days. He checks up on me almost as much as Uri does—though never at the same time. I've come to see him as a real friend.

I glance out the window and see it streaked with rain. "Ziva loved rainy days," I whisper softly. "Any excuse to stay home under a thick blanket and make hot chocolate. To this day, I can't see rain without also smelling hot cocoa."

Nikolai laughs bitterly, to my surprise. "Our rainy days were a little different."

"Oh, yeah? What did you guys do?"

"It was just Uri and me. Polly hadn't been born yet and Lev was just a baby. Our father used to take us to the shed out back and we used to have target practice. Any time the skies got dark, he told the men to set the dummies up. When I see rain, I smell metal and gunpowder."

"My God, that's bleak."

"Not exactly the wholesome childhood story you were expecting, eh?"

"Yeah, I'd say it's a little light on sunshine and rainbows."

Nikolai shrugs. “The thing is, it felt pretty wholesome to me. At least, it did before Otets decided to become a raging asshole.”

“What do you mean?”

Nikolai clears his throat and I get the sense that he regrets saying anything at all. He’s fidgeting a lot more than he was a second ago. “Nothing. Just typical alpha male shit. He’d constantly pit Uri and me against each other. Make everything a competition. I just wanted to shoot guns; I didn’t care if there was a winner.”

“This might not be the right question to ask, but *was* there a winner?”

His lips purse up. “It was always Uri. That little fuck was a damn natural with a gun. Actually... he was a natural with most things.”

“Sounds annoying.”

“Incredibly. Especially since I was the older brother.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Trust me, it mattered. Our father expected me to be the stronger one, the faster one, the more capable one. Most of my adolescence was, *Why can’t you be more like your little brother? Or Uri should have been the firstborn.*”

My jaw drops. “You’re kidding. That’s horrible.”

“That was my dad.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he says in a clipped voice. “I stopped placing my self-worth on my father’s opinion a long time ago.”

“If it’s any consolation, my dad wasn’t much better. He was an asshole, too—just in a different way.” I fidget against the pillows. “I guess his only redeeming quality was that he ignored both Ziva and me. Mom did, too, if I’m being brutally honest. Maybe that’s why it felt as though I lost everything after Ziva died. It really did feel like I didn’t have anyone anymore.” I glance at Nikolai out of the corner of my eyes.

“Which is why it was so easy for me to bond with Lev and Polly. I suppose that’s the kind of family dynamic I always wanted for myself.”

Nikolai raises his eyebrows. “Dysfunctional, you mean?”

“Ha-ha. You guys may be dysfunctional but at least you have each other’s backs. You care about one another. *That’s* family.” I start picking at my fingernails, trying to keep the hope from getting the best of me before we have a real reason to believe. “Do you think Uri will find Polly tonight?”

Nikolai glances at his watch. “You never know with this kind of stuff. We live in a world of smoke and mirrors. Sometimes, you reach for a sure thing and come up empty.”

I flop back and sigh. “If only I could just remember something that might help you guys find her. It’s just that the memories are so hazy I’m not even sure I can trust them.”

“You’re putting too much pressure on yourself. There might be nothing there to remember.”

“My gut’s telling me otherwise.”

“Your gut also told you to accept dinner with my brother. It’s got a checkered past.”

I throw him a dirty look and he just chuckles. When he stops, he leans in and looks me in the eye. “You went through a lot recently, Alyssa—all while pregnant. You haven’t given yourself enough time to process, to recover—”

“What ever happened to the therapist you said you’d find for me? To help jog my memories?”

He clears his throat uncomfortably. “Things got a little sidetracked after the bleeding incident. Uri was on board at first, but now... well, it’s tough to get anyone new in or out of the gates.”

“For fuck’s sake!” I cry. “His overprotectiveness is getting out of hand.”

“You could have lost those babies, Alyssa. I’d say his reaction is justified.”

“Wonderful. So glad you’re taking his side.”

Nikolai holds up his hands in self-defense. “I’m on the side of my nephews or nieces in there,” he says, pointing to my belly. “That’s it.”

I give him a smile. “Fair enough. I can live with that. Thank you, Nikolai.”

“For what?” he asks, looking suddenly sheepish.

“For being so nice to me. For making me feel like a person again. For listening to me even when you didn’t have to. And for refusing to let me take the blame for... well, for everything.” I reach out and put my hand on his. “You have no idea how much it means to me.”

Then, for the second time that day, Uri bursts into my room. Nikolai jerks out from underneath my hand and lunges to his feet as though he’s been caught doing something he shouldn’t.

Uri’s eyes flit from him to me. But I’m less concerned about their weird sibling rivalry and more concerned with knowing if the lead panned out.

“Well?” I ask. “Did you find Polly? Did you find anything?”

“It was a dead lead,” Uri says impatiently. “I found the girl who matched Polly’s description—except that she was a former stripper named Octavia. I spoke to her for a couple of minutes but no one’s seen Polly in that joint.”

“Fuck,” Nikolai mutters. “So we’re back to square one.”

“We haven’t exhausted all our options yet. We just have to keep looking.”

Nikolai runs a hand through his hair. “Yeah, okay. I’m gonna check on our recon teams. See if they’ve picked up anything. Excuse me.” He barely glances at me on his way out.

Uri watches his brother leave. Then he shuts the door with an expression in his eyes that I can’t quite read. “You and Nikolai seem to be getting... close.”

“What was that pause you made before ‘close’?” I frown. “Also you said ‘close’ like it should have been in quotation

marks.”

“Did I?”

I roll my eyes. “Don’t think I didn’t notice that comment you made earlier, the first time you barged in here.”

“What comment?”

I grit my teeth. “The whole, *You stay; you two look pretty cozy anyway*,” I remind him. Uri rounds the corner of the bed and I shove myself up a little to give him space. “You wanna tell me why you’re acting all weird with Nikolai all of a sudden?”

“That’s the usual way I act with Nikolai. You’ll get used to it.”

“I like your brother. He’s a good person.”

Uri turns to me, his eyes bright under the lights. Then, without warning, his hand curls around my neck and he pulls me towards him. Our lips meet in the middle and just like that, I’ve completely forgotten what we were talking about.

Which, I suppose, is the point.

ALYSSA

“You promised!”

Uri’s hands clench together and the violently pulsing muscle in his jaw goes even wilder. “And I’ll keep my promise. One day.”

“What does that even mean?” I cry, getting right in his face. “I called Elle three days ago, right after you agreed. We made plans. One o’clock at Seed. That’s literally thirty minutes from now.”

“It’s a bad time, Alyssa. Polly—”

“Don’t you dare use your sister as an excuse,” I snap. “You agreed to let me meet Elle for lunch. And considering that I missed her wedding because of you, I’d say you owe me.”

“For fuck’s sake.” He takes a deep breath and releases it. “Fine. I’ll drive you over there. But just so you know, I’m staying the whole time.”

He starts walking to the front door with an air of finality that ends the conversation. It’s pointless arguing with him when he’s in this kind of mood. But I’m standing my ground this time. Going to see Elle is more than just lunch; it’s a fight for my dignity.

What’s left of it, that is.

It takes twenty minutes to get to the restaurant, every single one of which is spent in stony silence. Uri stops right in front of the windows without a care in the world that there are half a dozen signs screaming not to park here.

“Get the table by the window so I can see you at all times.”

I turn to him with pursed lips. “Are you serious?”

“Do I look serious?”

“Uri—”

“If you don’t, I’ll walk right in there and make you switch.”

Gritting my teeth, I nod. “Fine. Asshole.”

He gives me a satisfied smile. “By the way... you look pretty.”

As irritated as I am, I do appreciate the compliment. I haven’t been feeling my best lately. It’s hard to feel sexy when you’ve got a growing belly that only promises to get larger with time. Which is why I’ve taken pains to look good today in a long black pencil skirt, ankle boots, and a billowy white blouse that does a great job of hiding my stomach.

“I’ll be right here. If you see anyone suspicious, call me immediately.”

I sigh. “Sure you don’t want to just come in with me?”

“No.”

Rolling my eyes, I get out of the car and step into Seed. The moment I walk in, I’m doused with the scent of patchouli oil and lavender.

“Alyssa!”

I steer to my left and catch sight of Elle, who’s standing at one of the corner booths, waving wildly at me. We rush towards one another and embrace tightly.

“Oh my God. It’s *so* good to see you.”

I can see the window out of the corner of my eye. The sleek, navy-blue Rolls Royce is parked just outside, with Uri’s silhouette prominent through the glass. “Elle, you have no idea. I’ve missed you so much.”

She pulls back but keeps both hands on my shoulders as her eyes scan me up and down in the least subtle way possible. “You look good.”

I smile. “Thanks.”

“No, I mean, you look *really* good. Like a woman thriving.”

I raise my eyebrows. “What were you expecting exactly?”

“I don’t know. A woman who looked like she’d been held captive for the past few months. Emphasis on ‘captive.’ Actually emphasis on ‘months,’ too!”

“Breathe,” I say firmly, trying not to glance towards the window. “I’m fine.”

She nods. “You have to fill me in. I need to know *everything*.”

Yeah, that’s what I was afraid of.

“And I’m gonna tell you everything.” Well, sort of. As far as I’m concerned, there are little white lies and necessary omissions that are totally justifiable. Even to best friends. “Should we sit first?”

“Sure thing. I got us a booth.”

“Um, actually... would it be alright if we sat by the window?”

Elle shrugs. “If you want. I don’t care where we sit.”

She grabs her bag out of the corner booth and walks it over to one of the window tables. As she’s sliding into her seat she notices the Rolls Royce. “Damn—now, *that’s* a car. Liam would go nuts if he saw it.”

“Yeah, it’s a nice car,” I mumble distractedly.

Uri is a little too visible from the driver’s seat and he just so happens to choose this moment to glance window-side.

“Whoa.” Elle’s eyes almost bulge out of her skull. “Forget the car. The man behind the wheel is the real eye candy. He’s *gorgeous!*”

Blech. It’s not like I can get away with keeping quiet *now*. “Um, yeah. That’s... Uri.”

“Who?” she asks without taking her eyes off Uri.

I frown. “For a best friend who claims to have missed the hell out of me, you’re certainly having a hard time keeping your attention on me. Also, you just got married. What are you doing ogling other men fresh off your honeymoon?”

Elle finally peels her eyes away from Uri—rather reluctantly, I might add. “Hey, I’m not planning on sampling the goods or anything. Just window shopping, that’s all.”

“Mhmm,” I smirk.

“What did you say before?”

I swallow. “The guy in the fancy car, the one you were just eyefucking shamelessly—*he’s* Uri. The guy I’ve, um, been with all this time.”

“*WHAT?!*”

“Quiet!” I hiss, hiding behind my menu as most of the restaurant turns in our direction. “Will you keep it down?”

“*That* is the man who abducted you and held you hostage this whole damn time?”

“First of all, that’s not exactly what happened. And second of all, *shh!*”

She turns back towards the window to take a second peek at Uri. Clearly aware that he’s under inspection, he raises his hand and gives Elle a small nod. It’s infuriatingly cool.

Elle gives him an unsteady wiggle of her fingers in return. “Well, he’s got style, I’ll give him that. Question: is he planning on coming in and joining us at some point?”

“No. Hell no. He wanted to give us some privacy while we catch up.”

“Thoughtful,” she remarks. “But why doesn’t he just drive away then? Go do something while we have lunch?”

“He just wants to make sure that I’m... safe.”

Elle’s frown disappears suddenly as her eyes go wide. “Wait. Is that why you wanted to sit by the window? So that he could see you at all times?”

Okay. This is going badly.

“Listen, Elle, things are complicated. He’s just worried about my safety.”

“Isn’t that the same sorry excuse he gave you before locking you up in his basement?”

Very badly.

“I told you the stakes the last time we spoke. We’re talking about the *mafia*, Elle. Bad guys are involved and Uri’s just worried about exposing me. That’s the only reason he’s sitting out there now. He’s just trying to protect me.”

“Honey, I don’t know if that’s actually true. Or…”

“Or…?”

“Or if you’re just getting love-drunk on the Kool-Aid he’s pouring down your throat.”

My heart is beating hard against my chest. I really don’t want her to hate Uri. Especially considering that “love-drunk” might not be so far from the truth.

“Elle,” I say, grabbing her hand, “I know this is a lot to take in. And I get that you’re worried for me. I am, too, to be honest. But not because of Uri.”

“He’s a beautiful man, Alyssa. In fact, he might be the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen. But that doesn’t excuse his behavior.” She leans forward and dips her chin to give me her serious look. “He’s lurking out there waiting for you. He told you to sit by the window. He had you under lockdown for months. He limited your contact with your friends and family. He doesn’t sound protective so much as way too possessive.”

“I know what it looks like,” I protest weakly, “but that’s not how it actually is.”

“No? In what ways?”

“It’s been a rough few weeks and he’s worried about us.”

“‘Us’? Who’s ‘us’?”

I take a deep breath and rip the Band-Aid off. “I’m pregnant, Elle,” I say with a shaky smile. “With twins.”

She gawks at me soundlessly for a few moments. Her mouth opens and closes a couple of times before she manages to get anything out. Ziva used to call it “going goldfish.”

“You’re not joking,” she breathes at last.

I smile weakly. “I wouldn’t joke about something like that. I’m entering my second trimester.”

“With twins?”

I nod. “Yeah. Twins. Identical twins.”

“I... I actually can’t believe it.”

“Trust me—I have trouble with it some days, too.”

Elle glances towards the window. “So... um, your sexy kidnapper out there... He’s worried that this bad dude mafia guy is going to come after you and the babies?”

I ignore the “sexy kidnapper” part, accurate though it may be. “That’s part of it. But last week, I had some pretty extreme bleeding and I thought I was gonna lose the babies. I’m okay now, but Uri... He’s been at my side pretty much nonstop since the hospital. He makes sure I eat well and drink well and get enough sleep.”

“But you’re fine? And the babies?”

“Both good. Both healthy.”

Elle nods. “And... forgive me for asking, but you’re happy about being pregnant? I’m assuming it wasn’t planned?”

“Not even a little bit,” I admit. “But it was never really a choice. I knew from the moment I had an inkling about their existence that I was going to go through with this.”

“And he’s happy, too?”

“I think so, yeah.”

Elle lets out a low whistle and leans back in her seat. “I have to say—that’s a buttload of information.”

I give her a self-conscious smile. “And you guys always thought I was the boring one in our little triangle.” I play with my Z link as I say it.

Elle smiles sadly. “Twins. Like you and Z. How do you feel about that?”

“Actually, it made me feel like it was meant to be. That she’s with me somehow, looking down at me from time to time. I think she’d have been happy for me.”

“Just to clarify, I’m happy for you, too. It’s just... your meet-cute isn’t exactly traditional.”

“No, but who wants traditional, am I right?”

Elle purses her lips. “I mean, if ‘traditional’ means I avoid being held captive for several months, I’ll take it over nontraditional any day.”

“He was doing that to protect me, Elle. I trust Uri and I really want you to give him a chance. For my sake, if nothing else.”

Elle sighs and glances out the window. Uri is on the phone with someone and his face is turned away from us. “Of course I’ll give him a chance. He’s the father of your children.”

“Thank you.” I reach out and take her hand. “I want to apologize for missing your bachelorette party and your wedding. I want you to know it killed me.”

“Your life is more important than a party. I get that.”

“Will you forgive me?”

She waves a dismissive. “You’re already forgiven.”

I release a sigh of relief. “Thank God. I’m gonna make it up to you.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” she says with a little smirk.

“How was it by the way? It’s your turn to tell me everything.”

The distraction technique works. Elle launches into a full story about the whole shebang. Her eyes light up as she speaks and I can tell how much that day meant to her. Her enthusiasm is catching because suddenly, I find myself imagining another wedding—one that involves Uri and me.

Stop that right now.

No good is gonna come of daydreaming about things that might never happen. Uri is many things, but the marrying kind? Yeah—I don’t think so.

“By the way, your mom and dad were at the wedding. They gifted me a crystal vase. It was very sweet.”

I tense up a little. “Did they ask about me?”

“Um, well, your mom did mention she thought it was ridiculous that you’d chosen a job over my big day. But if you’re asking if they suspected that something was amiss, then the answer is no, I don’t think they did.”

Sighing, I try to push my frustration away. Uri returned my phone back to me some time ago. He’d kept up the façade of my “work trip” to Cuba. Every so often, he texted my mother or answered a message from my father. He’d done a pretty good job, all things considered, of making it sound like he was me.

Not that it was a hard thing to do. My conversation threads with my parents were short, to the point, and lacking any real affection.

“I texted Mom yesterday and asked how she and Dad were doing. Still haven’t received a response.”

“Shit. I’m sorry, hon.”

I shrug. “You’d think they’d want to be close with the one child they have left. But apparently not.”

“You guys went through a rough patch after Ziva died. Maybe you just need more time to recover from that.”

“Eight years is pretty long for a ‘patch,’ Elle.”

“Did you guys ever have a real conversation?” she inquires. “After that big blowout fight?”

I tense up, goosebumps spreading over my body like wildfire. I actively avoid thinking about that time because it puts me right back in the moment and it’s not the kind of memory I want to relive. It’s not the kind of memory I ever wanted to live in the first place.

“No, not really. We just did what we always do: swept it under the rug.”

“No wonder it’s festered.”

“Nothing’s festered,” I argue, sounding defensive even to my own ears. “I was never close to my parents.”

“It was never this bad, though,” Elle points out. “Come on, Lys, let’s be real here. You’ve been gone for months without much of an explanation and I was way more concerned than your parents.”

It hurts to hear but it’s true. “I’ve tried with them, Elle, but—

“Have you?”

“Excuse me?”

She hides behind her glass of water for a moment. “I’m just saying, I was there. I saw it all unfold. After Ziva died... emotions were running high. Things were said. And instead of dealing with the fallout, you all retreated to your separate corners.”

My stomach roils uncomfortably. “Why are you pushing this?”

Elle frowns. “Because it’s important to have people in your life, Alyssa. A support system. Someone who’ll notice if you, oh, I dunno... *randomly disappear*.” She glances towards the window. “I’m not sure that relying on one man, no matter how handsome or how nice his car, is the right thing for you.”

I sigh and give her hand a squeeze. “I know I can’t get you onboard today, so all I can do is let time convince you that Uri is a good man. He’s just... complicated.”

She doesn’t look satisfied with that answer. “Don’t you want something simple?”

“I did. Then my sister died.” Elle raises her eyebrows and I take a deep breath. “Sorry,” I murmur quickly, running my hand over my stomach. “I just... I really wish she was here.”

“I know. I’m sorry, too. I shouldn’t poke; you know what’s best for you.”

I smile and make another attempt at changing the subject. “Tell me all about your honeymoon. Where’d you guys end up going?”

“Hawaii,” she says as her eyes light up all over again. “Two full weeks by the beach in this really nice resort. We used up all the money we got as wedding presents but it was totally worth it.”

“I’m so glad.”

“And we came back from Hawaii with a little lifetime souvenir,” Elle says as her cheeks flush with color. “I’m pregnant, too!”

I gasp as shock and joy jolts through my body. “Seriously?”

“Doubt I’m gonna have twins, but there’s definitely one bun in the oven. Liam and I are over the moon.”

“So am I! Elle, our kids are gonna grow up together!” There’s an emotional wobble in her chin as we slide out of our seats just so that we can embrace. “This is just great news.”

It *is* great news.

Now, if only we can get Polly back safe and sound, I can really enjoy it.

URI

I'm waiting for Alyssa outside the restaurant when a call comes in from Nikolai. "Where are you?"

"Out."

"Okay, then you can go check out this place called Matros. I've heard through the grapevine that Sobakin might have been an investor in the bar. Maybe we can poke around there, see if something comes up."

"That's all you have? Sobakin may have invested in some shithole in Santa Monica?"

"You got any better ideas? We've exhausted every other rumor, man. It wouldn't hurt to check this out."

"I can't do it right now."

"Why not?"

I peek towards the window. Alyssa and her friend are out of their seats and hugging each other tightly. I'm guessing Alyssa probably shared her pregnancy news. "Because Alyssa's having lunch with her friend and I'm on bodyguard duty."

"Are you serious?"

The annoyance in his voice takes me aback. "Why would I joke?"

"You could have put Stepan or Vlad or literally anyone else in the whole goddamn Bratva on bodyguard duty."

"Except there's no one I trust more than myself."

“For God’s sake... Listen, I’m glad you and Alyssa managed to sort out your shit—but in case you’ve forgotten, our sister’s still missing.”

My jaw clenches together hard enough to make my whole head throb. Nikolai’s words are bad enough; his tone makes them far worse. “I haven’t forgotten,” I snarl. “I’m just trying to make sure Alyssa and my children don’t end up missing, either.”

He clicks his teeth in irritation. “I’m going to the shed. I think it’s time I took a shot at Sobakin. Maybe I can get something out of him that you couldn’t.”

Apparently, my brother is looking for a fight today. “You better watch yourself now, Niko. Don’t go down there alone.”

“*You* do. Why can’t I?”

“I’m the fucking *pahkan*. I can do whatever I damn well please.” I’m just being an asshole now for no good reason. Why shouldn’t he try? But I’m dug in and there’s no going back.

He’s silent for a prolonged few seconds. “Fine,” he spits bitterly. “As you say, you’re the *pahkan*. Just try not to take all goddamn day, yeah?”

He hangs up before I can bite back at him. Alyssa’s lunch takes another hour. I’m at the point where I’m ready to walk in and pull her out when I notice Alyssa signal to the waitress for the bill. I step into the restaurant to intercept the hostess and pay for their meal myself. A few minutes later, both women walk out towards me.

Alyssa has her arm linked with Elle’s, who steps up to me with curious eyes and a careful smile.

“Thanks for the meal,” she says. “You didn’t have to.”

“It was my pleasure. Lovely to meet you, Elle. I’ve heard so much about you.”

Any attempt at sizing me up subtly is quickly abandoned. She sweeps me up and down like she’s checking me for weapons.

She'd better not look too closely, though, because she'll find several. "All good things, I hope."

"Nothing but good. You'll have to come and visit Alyssa at the estate one day when you're free."

Alyssa looks surprised that I made the offer but she doesn't say anything. Elle just nods. "I'll definitely do that. Oh, and—congrats."

Something inside me blows up like a balloon. It feels suspiciously like real joy. "Thank you."

Once we've said goodbye to Elle and cleared the restaurant, Alyssa turns to me with a grateful smile. "Thanks for letting me do that today. It was much needed."

"How much did you tell her?"

"Only enough to reassure her that I was not in any danger with you."

"So you lied to her?"

She snorts. "Not helping."

I suppress a smile and step on the gas. I already know that the long wait will piss Nikolai off. I'm hoping it does. I'm not in a charitable mood.

The moment we get back home, I escort Alyssa to her bed to get some rest. She goes without a fuss, which is a surefire sign that her little outing has tired her out. Once she's tucked away, I leave the house again and cross the garden towards the shed.

Nikolai's already in there, looking blotchy-faced with anger. "There you are!" he snaps, bouncing to his feet. "Fucking finally."

"What the hell is your problem today?"

I really don't need to be at odds with Nikolai right now. But he's making it difficult not to want to wring his neck.

"We have work to do. An enemy *pakhan* to crack and you're out there, supervising teatime with the ladies."

I snatch him up by the collar and pull him towards me so that he can see the fire in my eyes. “You may be my brother, Niko—but that doesn’t mean I won’t kick the shit out of you if I have to.” I push him back hard so that he stumbles a bit. “Now, check your attitude or I’ll check it for you.”

Nikolai straightens up, his jaw set in a tight square. “Can I go downstairs now, *sir*?”

“Be my guest.”

Scowling, he trots downstairs and I follow close behind. Alan is huddled up on his side of the cell with a pillow placed over his head. He stirs and groans dramatically when we turn the lights on. Boris, on the other hand, looks alert and wide awake as Nikolai opens the cell door and struts in.

I have to hand it to him—the man is a workhorse. He’s been through two solid weeks of torture. He’s had parts of his body flayed, been deprived of food and water for days on end. He’s got a broken leg and probably a few broken ribs now, too. Even waterboarding him for endless hours did nothing.

Through it all, he’d stayed silent. If he hadn’t sold my sister into sex slavery, he might have earned my respect.

As it is, he’ll only earn more violence.

“Back to beat a dead horse?” Boris drawls. His voice gets raspier with each passing day. I like to think it’s the will leaving his body.

“*Tsk, tsk.* You’re not dead yet, Boris. Nor are you going to enjoy the sweet relief of death until my sister is back under my protection.”

He manages a bloody, toothless smirk. “Pain is all in the head.”

“We’re here to disabuse you of that notion. Nikolai?”

I move to the side to give him free rein. My brother steps in front of Boris and glares down at him. “Who did you sell her to?”

Boris simply spits at Nikolai’s shoes. Nikolai punches him in the face so hard, the man loses consciousness instantly. I roll

my eyes. “You know the point is to keep him conscious, right?” I ask. “He can’t give us answers if he’s not awake.”

Grinding his teeth, Nikolai walks over to the tap outside the cell to fill the basin up with water. I stand back and let Nikolai do his thing. I give him fifteen minutes and by the end of it, Boris is unconscious again and bleeding from half a dozen new places. The open gash on his stomach looks sickeningly bad.

“I’m gonna have to get Grigory in here to see to that now.” I sigh, grabbing Nikolai’s wrist and pulling off the brass knuckles he slipped on ten minutes ago.

“Let him suffer,” Nikolai hisses as he pushes past me and storms upstairs, fuming.

I throw Alan a piece of stale bread before I follow Nikolai back to ground level. “Letting him suffer is one thing. Letting him die is another. If he dies, that’s it. The trail ends with him.”

“What does it matter?” Nikolai yells. “He’s not talking!”

I narrow my eyes. “Believe me now, do you?”

“What’s your problem?” Nikolai twists around. The brass knuckles have kept his fists clean but there’s a small bruise forming along the bridge.

I step right up in his face, jabbing him in the chest with a finger. “Did you really think I was half-assing the job? That I just go down there every day to sing him lullabies and feed him grapes by hand?”

“Who’s to say? It’s not like you haven’t been distracted lately.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that you have your own family now. A *new* family. And maybe that means your old family falls a little lower on the totem pole.”

I am *this* close to putting those brass knuckles on my own hand and beating my brother to a pulp. “Say that again. I dare you.”

“It’s the truth.”

“I’m not *you*, Nikolai. I’ve always been able to concentrate on two things at the same time. I can take care of Alyssa and still look for Polly.”

“If that’s the case, then why the *fuck* haven’t we found her yet?!”

“You’re blaming me?”

“As you love to keep reminding me, *you* are the fucking *pahkan*. Which means whatever happens or doesn’t happen is *your* fault. The fact that Polly was taken is *your* fault. The fact that she still hasn’t been found is *your*—”

“I’m warning you, Nikolai: stop right there or—”

“—I mean, for God’s sake, it’s like you don’t even care that she’s missing anymore!”

He should have stopped when I told him to.

I grab him by the throat and bang him against the closed back door. He slams into the tired wood so hard that the whole foundation rattles. It’s intensely satisfying having him under my thrall. So, just to get my point across a little clearer, I whack him back against the door a second time. He strikes the base of his skull and hisses in pain.

Good. Maybe that’ll knock some sense into him.

Apparently not, though, because he tries to fight back. I block his fist twice before I unleash a punch of my own. Unlike him, I find my mark.

I beat him to the ground just like I used to when we were kids. When he tries to get up, I kick him back down and put my boot on his chest.

“Stay down, Nikolai,” I hiss. “Stay the fuck down.”

He growls up at me but the defeat is evident in his face. He stops struggling, his hands falling onto the ground on either side of him.

“You know that I would do anything for Polly. Don’t you *dare* question my love for her again. Or my dedication to finding

her and bringing her back home safely.”

I remove my boot and Nikolai gasps for air. I walk to the door before turning back to glance at Nikolai, who’s still sprawled and panting on the floor.

“Oh, and one more thing: fuck you for ever doubting me. I won’t forget that.”

Then I slam the door in his face.

ALYSSA

The smell of roasting meat and cheese hits my nostrils the moment I step out of my room. Chef must be preparing something deliciously on Uri's orders, because the house has never smelled this good.

I follow my nose to the kitchen but stop short when I see the army of candles standing sentinel around the breakfast nook. Fresh flowers bloom in every corner and the overhead lighting has been dimmed to a romantic glow.

"Uh... Uri?"

He pops around the corner, wearing a black apron that reads *Kiss the Cook*. Not a bad idea, actually. If his face and apron weren't enough of an invitation, the ladle in his hand definitely is.

"Did you cook?"

"Thought I'd give the kitchen staff the night off and make you something myself."

"Is that... chicken parmesan I'm smelling?"

"Nothing gets past you, does it, *narushitel*?"

I walk in slowly, trying to decipher the determined, borderline manic expression on his face. He's plating up our meals with the precision of a three-star chef but I still don't trust that haze over his eyes.

"Uri, this is wonderful. But... are you okay?"

"Of course."

I notice his bruised knuckles and reach for his hand automatically. He freezes while I examine his fist. “What happened?”

He pulls it out of my grasp. “Same old shit that always happens. All in a day’s work.”

“Then why don’t you look okay? Is it Polly? Have you heard ___”

“I can’t talk about Polly right now, Alyssa.”

His tone is sharp and my mouth clamps shut immediately. That’s the look in his eyes. He needs a distraction. He needs to focus on something other than what he considers a personal failure. I so badly want to go to him, pull him into my arms and hold him for as long as he needs. But I know from experience that trying to comfort him is a surefire method of pushing him away.

So instead, I swallow the words that are on the tip of my tongue—*It’s not your fault. She’s going to be okay. You’ll find her soon*—and I let him take control.

“Can I do anything?”

He relaxes gratefully. “Grab some glasses.”

We sit down at the table, which is beautifully set already. He’s got me sparkling apple juice and a side of pickles thanks to my new and embarrassingly stereotypical pregnancy cravings.

“Thanks for cooking for me.”

He nods. “Dig in. Those babies need to be fed and fed well.”

I cut into my chicken parm and the buttery, cheesy goodness wafts up towards me. I’m so worried about him that I have to force myself to take the first bite. But the moment all those spices hit my taste buds, I can’t put my knife and fork down.

“Well, if the whole Bratva *pahkan* thing doesn’t work out, you have a bright future as a chef.”

He smirks. He’s finished half his vodka but barely touched his entrée. I pretend not to notice.

“My parents haven’t noticed that anything is wrong,” I blurt out when I’m almost done eating. Uri raises his eyebrows and it makes me question if this is the right way to distract him. “Um... I mean, they bought the whole Cuba story.”

He nods. “They didn’t ask a whole lot of questions.”

“That’s because they don’t really care.” I shrug, he frowns, and I sigh as I lose that little nonverbal battle. “I didn’t mean for that to come out so bitter.”

“If what you’ve said is true, you’re justified in some bitterness, Alyssa.”

“Oh, it’s *definitely* true.” I snort and set my fork down on the edge of my plate. “Ziva was always better with them. She was the favorite child. Ironic, really, that she was the one who had to go and I’m the one they got stuck with.”

Upside? That distracted, troubled haze over Uri’s eyes is gone.

Downside? I’ve sucked myself into a conversation about my parents.

“Did they say that to you?”

“They didn’t have to. After Ziva died, they just kinda retreated into their part of the house and I retreated to mine. They stopped coming around to school events. They stopped celebrating my birthday. They stopped taking an interest in my life. They didn’t even show up to my college graduation. Dad called a couple of hours before and told me that Mom was having migraines so bad she couldn’t get in the car. Can you believe that?”

Uri leans in closer, but he doesn’t say anything. It’s amazing how much he can get across with those deep blue eyes, though. I feel like all of him is here, listening to me.

“Maybe part of it was my fault. I basically blamed them for Ziva’s death.”

“Why?”

“Because, when she decided to stop treatment, they *let* her.”

“Maybe they were trying to respect her decision,” he suggests.

I grit my teeth together. “It was *our* decision to make as a family. And it was *our* job to show Ziva that we had her back no matter what. She didn’t want to be a burden to us. That’s why she wanted to stop treatment. It’s the only reason she wanted to die. If they had just... just...” I break off as a sob robs me of the rest of my words. Even worse is the tear splashing onto my food and sizzling on contact. “Shit. Now, I’m crying. I feel like an idiot...”

“Why?”

I wipe my tears away quickly. “Because you’ve gone and prepared a lovely meal for us and I’m slobbering all over it.”

If he cares, he shows no sign of it. His eyes stay fixed on me. “You’ve never told me any of this before.”

“Because I don’t like talking about Ziva. Or my parents. To anyone. Not even Elle, and she practically lived in our house at one point.”

He leans forward and takes my hand. “I appreciate it, you know.”

“W-what?”

He smiles. “Your attempts to distract me. It worked.”

I can’t help but burst out with a teary laugh and roll of the eyes. “I hate when you see right through me. Glad I could comfort you with my dysfunctional family, though.”

“All families are dysfunctional, Alyssa. Happiness is what we make for ourselves.” He gets to his feet and offers me his hand. “Come on. Let’s go to bed.”

That does have a nice ring to it. I take his hand and let him guide me back to my room. I know that Uri’s proper bedroom is on the third floor, near Lev’s—but ever since I’ve been upgraded to the ground floor, he’s been camping in the room next to mine. Which has left me with a serious lady-boner for the last few days. Knowing that he’s right there, one thin wall between us. Probably lying awake late at night just like I am, wondering where it all went wrong and what it’s going to take to make it all right again.

He holds my hand until we reach the bed. Then he spins me around and starts undressing me with patient, careful movements.

“I can take off my own clothes, you know.”

“I cooked dinner.” His fingers brush the nape of my neck, leaving shivers in their wake. “It’s only fair that you bring the dessert.”

I spin around slowly in his arms until he’s cradling me close to him. “Then let me feed it to you,” I say with a suggestive wink.

Uri’s eyebrows arch but he says nothing. Instead, he lets me return the favor, unbuttoning his shirt and peeling it off of him. His belt goes next, then his pants and boxers. When he’s naked, I put my hands on his shoulders and guide him to his back on top of the comforters. I follow, planting a knee on either side of his hips while his erection nuzzles at my wetness.

It’s easy to admire him from here. The smooth planes of his muscles. His hardness all over, the dusting of hair on his abdomen. He just exudes *man*. It makes me feel—well, it would *normally* make me feel...

My soft smile curdles. “Maybe we should switch positions.”

“Why?”

I look down at my protruding stomach. “I probably look like a fat cow from this angle.”

Uri’s eyes flare with anger as he jerks up towards me. “You look fucking perfect,” he growls in my face, breath tinged with the tang of vodka. “Don’t you ever talk about yourself like that again. You hear me?” He’s so emphatic that I find myself nodding. “Good.” He settles back down on his elbows, eyes still fiery. “Now—ride me, Alyssa.”

So I do. I slip him inside me and settle down until I’m adjusted around his girth. Then I ride him slowly, as per the doctor’s orders. We fit together perfectly, just like we always do. He hits every spot I’ve ever needed and a few I didn’t even know I had. I lose myself to it, to him, letting my head loll back and

my hair waterfall down my spine, breathing each moan up to the ceiling.

“Slow” doesn’t last long, though. The more I get lost in his heat, his cock buried deep inside me, the faster I go, until we’re a blur of motion together and he rises up to kiss me with a hot, greedy open mouth. That’s when I come—fastened to Uri from head to toe, every inch of me plastered to every inch of him. He comes with me, spilling all the way inside with a guttural grunt that makes my toes curl and cramp.

I hold him close afterwards, breathing in his rich woody scent. “Will you stay with me tonight?” I ask. I don’t even give a damn about how needy I must sound, how pathetic. Sometimes, we women just *need*. This is one of those times.

“Yes,” he says simply, kissing my head.

And he does.

Somewhere between his whispered promise and the way he grazes his hand over my arm, I fall asleep. At first, there’s nothing but sweet oblivion. Exactly what I needed.

But then the nightmares come.

They all end the same way. With both Lev and Polly being yanked away from me. They’re dragged into the shadows by faceless hands and two Russian beasts emerge in their places. Their voices crackle like the wind and cast shadow monsters that seem to get bigger and bigger as they mutter a word that’s too low and indistinct for me to make out.

“No!” I scream but my voice is lost in the shadows. “No!”

“Alyssa.”

“Get away from me!”

“Hey, now. It’s okay. Shh.”

“Give them back to me! Please, God, just—”

“*Alyssa.*”

I gasp, my eyes springing open as those huge, talon-tipped shadow hands grab hold of me. No—not shadow hands. *Uri’s* hands.

His face hangs over me in the gloom, eyes bright, teeth white. “It’s okay. You were just having a nightmare.”

I shake my head. “It wasn’t a nightmare. It actually happened to me,” I whisper gasp, holding on to him tight. “Those men... I remember them now... the ones who took Polly...”

Uri’s eyes go wide. “What do you remember, Alyssa?”

My heart is racing. There was something specific I remembered. Something I know is important. But it’s slipping away fast.

What word were they saying? They said it again and again in a voice like thunder, low and rumbling and so deep I felt it in my bones. Ommm... Dommm...

“Dominik!” I blurt suddenly. “They mentioned a name when they dragged her away. Dominik. That’s what they said.”

Uri’s expression is unreadable but the urgency on his face is evident enough—this is the breakthrough we needed.

He nods once, presses a kiss to my forehead and gets off the bed.

“Wait. Where are you going?”

He starts pulling on his clothes in a frenzy. Instead of answering me, he leans in again and catches my lips with his. It’s a hard kiss—forceful, passionate, full of promise. When he breaks away from me, his eyes are bright. “I’ll be back, okay?”

And with that, he’s gone.

URI

The door bursts open and Nikolai sweeps in. “Anything from Kruger yet?”

I’m staring down at my phone waiting for it to ring. “Nothing yet.”

He walks over to my desk but doesn’t sit down. His eyebrows are arched and his skin looks pale. “How did you get the name?”

“Alyssa. She had a dream a few hours ago and when I woke her up, she had that name on her lips.”

“No last name, though?”

“No, but I’m hoping this will be enough. Sit down.”

“I can’t sit,” Nikolai complains, running a hand through his hair. “I’ll self-combust if I sit still.” He goes to the window instead and looks out over the lawn. Apart from the recessed garden lights, everything is shrouded in darkness.

Ring-ring. Ring-ring.

I grab the phone and put it on speaker for Nikolai’s benefit. “Kruger?”

“I got two hits, boss,” he says breathlessly. “The first one is Dominik Drozdov. No one you’d have any reason to know. He’s a small-time hitman and gun for hire who’s been known to dabble in the rings from time to time.”

My teeth gnash together. “And the second hit?”

“Dominik Evanoff.”

I glance towards Nikolai, whose eyes are wide with surprise.
“As in the *pahkan* of the Evanoff Bratva?”

“That’s the one, boss.”

My gut stirs uncomfortably. “Dig up whatever you can find about both men. I need to be sure which one we’re after.” After I hang up, I twist my swivel chair towards Nikolai who’s still by the window. “We’ve never had a problem with the Evanoffs.”

Nikolai nods in agreement. “They’ve always been happy to function on a lower scale, defer to you as the alpha.”

“Unless something has changed...?”

Nikolai shakes his head. “The Evanoffs do most of their work out of Russia. They’d never challenge us Stateside like this. That’d be ludicrous. Straight-up suicide.”

“I agree. But we need to make sure.” I pick up my phone and dial in a Russian number that I haven’t called since before Alyssa made an appearance on my fence.

“*Privet*, cousin,” Dimiv answers. “It’s been a while.”

“Unfortunately, this is not a social call.”

“I didn’t think so. Isn’t it the middle of the night in your neck of the woods?”

“Sleep is for the weak, *dvoyurodnyy brat*.”

“Tell me what is the matter. I will do whatever I can to help from here.”

“I need you to look into the Evanoffs.”

I hear the rustle of him moving in surprise. “Have they crossed you?”

No, but Nikolai crossing the room again and again will drive me insane long before the Evanoffs will drive me into an early grave. I breathe out and remind myself to focus. “That’s what I’m trying to figure out. Before I make my move, I need to be sure.”

“I’ll ask around. It will be handled; do not worry. If I may ask, what is it you think they’ve done?”

If it were anyone else, I wouldn’t have been willing to share. But Dimiv is more than a cousin; he’s been an ally through adventures thick and thin. “Polly’s been taken. She’s been sold into the rings.”

Another sharp intake of breath. “*Fuck.*”

“I have reason to believe she was sold to a man named ‘Dominik’ and now, I need to figure out which one.”

“What crazy *mudak* would have sold her to the rings?”

I rub my temples against the incoming headache. “Boris Sobakin.”

“*That cunt?*” Dimiv exclaims in shock. “Didn’t know he had the balls.”

“He’s got something better—a lack of weaknesses.”

“*Everyone* has weaknesses, cousin. It may not be obvious but there’s always one.”

His confidence is catching, which is good, because the initial excitement of Alyssa remembering the name is quickly fading away. I just feel fucking tired again. “Do me a favor and dig up whatever you can about Sobakin, too. Whatever you think might help me.”

“Got it. I’ll get to work immediately.”

He hangs up and Nikolai finally stops pacing, thank fuck. His dark undereye circles are getting to be as bad as mine are. “Is this it? Is that what brings her back to us?”

“I hope so,” I mutter. “If not, I might just have to kill that motherfucker in the shed.”

I notice the bruise on Nikolai’s neck from when I grabbed him earlier. We’ve given each other our fair share of wounds over the years. But we always come together at the end of the day when the stakes get high enough.

Blood is thicker than water. That matters now more than ever.

The sun is slowly creeping out of the sky as I get to my feet. “You need to get some sleep,” I tell Nikolai, slapping him on the back. It’s as close to an apology as either of us will ever get.

He eyes me for a while before he sighs and eases. “I will when you do.”

He heads back to his place and I take a detour to the kitchen to make a tray before going to Alyssa’s room. I walk in quietly, hoping not to wake her, but she’s conscious and sitting up in bed, clearly waiting for me.

“Hey,” she mumbles quietly, nervously.

I pause at the foot of the bed. “How are you feeling?”

“Anxious, worried, hopeful,” she rattles off. “Did you look into who this Dominik person might be? Do you think he has Polly? Do you know where you can find him?”

I put the tray down on her bedside table and force her to lean back down on the pillows. “You need to take a deep breath and drink some tea.”

She takes the cup I hold out distractedly, but she makes no move to sip from it. “I don’t want tea.”

“Drink it anyway.”

“Uri—”

“I’m working on it, okay? I’m not sure who this Dominik is but I’m going to find out. We’ll get Polly back, I promise you that.”

With that promise secured, she takes a sip of the tea. “You haven’t slept all night, have you?”

“I need to strike while the iron is hot.”

She sighs and puts her cup down so she can grab my hands. “I’m worried about you. You need to rest. This isn’t healthy, Uri.”

“When I sleep, I dream. So I’d rather avoid it.”

“Come here.” She pulls me onto the bed in front of her with my back to her face. Then she pulls off my shirt and starts massaging me, starting from my shoulders and working her way down to my back. Her hands are small and cool on my skin and not strong enough to make much of a dent in the deep-seated knots tying me up. But it feels good nonetheless. To let myself sit here and do nothing, to let my eyes flutter closed while she pours her love into me, one fingertip at a time.

Eventually, my eyes start to tire. She coaxes me onto my side and slips in front of me.

“Alyssa...”

“Shh,” she croons hypnotically. “You’ve been taking care of me. Now, it’s my turn to take care of you. Just rest. I’m here. I’m right here.”

URI

The few hours of sleep I manage to get after Alyssa's hands work their magic does wonders. I feel the most alert, the most capable, the strongest I've felt in a while. My thoughts are clear and focused. My determination is as steely as ever.

We're going to bring my sister home.

While Alyssa is upstairs spending time with Lev, I pore over every bit of information my team has managed to dig up on Sobakin and both Dominiks.

The more I read up on Evanoff, the less I believe he has anything to do with Sobakin or Polly's capture. In fact, there might even be some enmity between him and Boris based on a few deals gone south involving the two men's respective organizations. Sobakin has burned a few too many bridges in his lifetime, it seems.

When my phone pings, I reach for it absentmindedly.

DIMIV: *Call now.*

The blood rushes to my fingers as I rush to dial him. He answers immediately. "Two things. Dominik Evanoff is not your man. There's bad blood between them, lots of it. It looks like Sobakin was responsible for the deaths of Evanoff's father and uncle."

"Doesn't surprise me. What's the second thing?"

"I looked into Boris's dealings in Moscow. One of my hackers managed to get a record of wire transactions made from

Boris's account to an offshore account linked to a woman living right here in Moscow. Elena Chernoff is her name."

My body is pinging with adrenaline. I get out of my seat and start pacing, bearing down the same track Nikolai wore into my carpets last night. "Doesn't ring a bell. But she has to mean something to Sobakin if he's providing for her."

"It's not her he's providing for," Dimiv clarifies. "It's her ten-year-old son. Artem. There's no father listed on his birth certificate, but I got a look at a picture of the boy a short while ago. If Sobakin isn't the daddy, you can go ahead and shoot me between the eyes."

Yes. Fucking yes.

"Dimiv Bugrov, I owe you one. Several, actually."

"That's what family is for, cousin."

"Keep digging. I've got business to take care of on this end."

The moment I hang up, I fly out of my office and towards the shed. Alan squeals and hides under his blankets when I kick the cell door open.

Sobakin, on the other hand, offers me an ugly smile. "You should know by now—I won't talk."

"Not even for Artem?"

The moment his name is out of my mouth, Boris's head snaps up. The smile melts off his face and his eyes look watery. The fear on his face is evident.

It's the sweetest thing I've seen all day.

"Don't you dare touch a hair on his head!"

I smile coldly. "You're in no position to be making demands of me, Boris."

Boris grinds his teeth. "You want to know who I sold your sister to?" he asks of his own accord. "I'll tell you: Dominik Drozdov. But that's as far as my knowledge goes. She was sold to him and that's where I lost track of her."

“What was her life worth?” I snarl. “How much did you sell her for?”

Boris shakes his head. “It was never about the money. I would have sold her for nothing if it meant watching you suffer.”

I probably should ask where this personal vendetta of his comes from. But I’m too angry to care. I settle on beating him senseless, until his head bobs on his neck, barely still attached. Then I walk away, leaving the broken shell of the man behind me.

I so desperately want to end his life right now, but I restrain myself. His corpse will be of no use to me. But he still might be.

Without even bothering to wipe the blood off my hands, I send texts to both Dimiv and Kruger, letting them both know that Drozdov is the man we’re looking for. Then I head to my bedroom to shower off Sobakin’s blood.

I’m stripping off my clothes when Alyssa walks in. Her eyes go wide as she sees the blood on my hands.

“It’s not mine,” I explain before she can ask.

That doesn’t seem to comfort her as she ventures closer. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fucking golden, Alyssa.” I turn to look at her, grinning. “I know who has Polly.”

She gasps, her eyes going round. “Really?”

“The lead you gave me—Dominik—it panned out.”

Relief floods her face. “Oh, thank God!” She immediately grabs her charm bracelet like it’s a string of prayer beads. “Thank God!”

She follows me to the bathroom and watches as I wash the blood off in the sink. When I turn off the water, she steps to my side and reaches up to touch the side of my face. She draws back her hand and I notice a fleck of blood on her thumb.

“It’s everywhere...” she whispers.

“How about you help me get clean?”

I don't wait for her to respond; I just start stripping her slowly. She stands there, watching me watch her. I make sure the water streaming from the shower faucet is warm before I pull her in with me. Her body looks ripe and perfect. The soft swell of her belly, the juicy fullness of her breasts—she looks like Venus coming out of her seashell.

Her hands float over my body the same way they did this morning. Except this time, she lathers me up, rubs the soap into my body before rinsing it off again. By the time she's finished, I'm rock hard and ready to plunge myself into her.

But when I try, she stops me. “No,” she says softly and a little self-consciously. “Not yet.”

Then, with rivulets of water running down her face and body, she gets on her knees in front of me and starts sucking me off.

“Fuck,” I moan as she takes me in the throat.

There's a confidence about her today that I haven't seen before. I get it, though—I feel high, too.

We're close. We're so fucking close.

She plays with my balls as she keeps sucking on my cock, pulling me in so deep that at times I genuinely think I'll lose control and come in her mouth. After the second time she gags on my cock, I pull out of her mouth and force her back onto her feet.

“I'm not waiting for you another goddamn second, *narushitel*,” I growl in her ear. “Because I'm gonna die if I don't bury myself in you right now.” Then I spin her around and push her against the glass wall of the shower.

I can see our silhouettes reflected in the mirror. Her breasts are pushed up against the glass, one cheek pushing her lips into a twisted smile. I push inside her slowly while she lets out a strangled little moan.

Then I fuck her slowly, watching my length disappear inside of her before I slide back out again. Her silky hair is sopping wet, hanging down her back in thick ropes. I stare,

mesmerized, as the water runs down her spine and down towards where our bodies meet. She's a work of art and I'm the only one who gets to enjoy her.

Is there any other man alive this lucky?

I keep one hand on her hip while the other wraps around her waist and I watch us in the mirror as we crash together again and again. Every thrust draws new, sputtering words from her lips.

“Yes, yes... fuck me, Uri... just take me... yes...”

Between the nap I had this morning and this right now, I've never felt more powerful. I feel like I can do anything. I pull out of her, twist her around, and before I can even tell her what I want, she drops to her knees as I paint her chest with my cum. She takes it all, head tilted back as the shower water and my seed descend on her.

I milk myself dry, but when her tongue darts out to catch a drop of the sticky whiteness from the side of her lips, I'm practically ready to go all over again.

“You're a dream I never want to wake up from,” I murmur to her as I help her back to her feet.

She keeps that same shy, freshly-fucked smile on her face as I clean her from head to toe. When we're both clean again and I turn the water off, she lets out a deep, contented sigh that I feel inside my chest.

How did I let this happen? I wonder.

This estate, my siblings, the Bratva—those things have always been my safe place. Those were the things that I considered home.

Now, when I think of home, all I see is *her*.

URI

I walk out of the bathroom to find my phone ringing on my desk. The number is listed as private but I answer it anyway. I have a feeling who it might be, and as soon as I hear the voice on the other end, my hunch is proven right.

“Hello, cousin. I have some good news for you.” Dimiv is giddy with excitement. Say what you will about the man’s methods—his enemies surely aren’t a fan of them—but he gets results. “I tracked down a location for Drozdov. An address where he’s rumored to keep his purchases. A storehouse of sorts, you might call it.”

I’m holding the phone so tight it’s in danger of cracking to pieces in my hands. “Tell me.”

“I’ll tell you in person when you scoop me from International Arrivals. But I’m sweating my balls off in this hellhole of a country, so hurry the fuck up, man.”

“You flew all the way here?” I ask in surprise.

Dimiv snorts. “Some fucker steals my baby cousin and tries to sell her into sex slavery? You bet your ass I flew in. You and Nikolai need me.”

“You’re a good man, Dimiv.” I’m already striding through the house and snatching keys from the pinboard by the garage. “On my way.”

I’m almost at the front door when Nikolai appears from around the corner. “Where are you off to in such a hurry?”

“That was Dimiv. I’m on the way to the airport to pick him up and we’re heading to one of Drozdov’s places.”

Nikolai’s eyes bug out of his head. “Dimiv is—he’s—he found—I’m coming.”

“No.” I plant a hand on his chest to stop him from following me. “I need you here, looking out for Lev and Alyssa. Dimiv and I have this covered.”

My brother’s face falls and his shoulders collapse forward. But then something lights him up. “Alyssa has an appointment with Grigory today. Don’t you want to be there for the check-up?”

Fucker. He knows what buttons to push.

“Alyssa will understand. This is about Polly. Tell her I’ll see her tonight.”

Before he can argue further, I close the door and rush towards my black SUV. I tear through rush hour, with traffic cameras popping off like fireworks as I rip straight through intersections and cut off damn near every vehicle on the road. Let the tickets pile up—I’ll pay them all gladly if it means bringing me to Polly even one second sooner.

At the airport, I find Dimiv standing impatiently on the curb, a duffel bag hanging off one shoulder. “Ass or cash?” I joke as I pull up in front of him with the window rolling down.

Dimiv looks up and grins. “I bet your ugly mug wishes I’d say ‘ass.’” He throws his duffel into the back and jumps into the passenger seat. “Good to see you, cousin.”

We embrace over the center console and he pounds my back twice, the way my uncle used to. It brings me right back to my childhood—summers in Russia, wrestling matches in the backyard, pierogies and pastilas every evening. Dimiv even smells like Uncle Petyr: cigarette smoke and Soviet-era Old Spice cologne.

“I wish we were reuniting under better circumstances,” he says with a sigh when we break apart. “You should have called me the minute shit hit the fan.”

I pull out and take the on-ramp that leads to the highway. “You have your own shit to deal with in Moscow.”

“Family is family, Uri. I know you’d show up if I called and said one of my boys was taken by some *mudak* with more greed than common sense.”

“I would. How are the boys, by the way?”

“Bogdan is studious and quiet. Osip is a handful and a half. Reminds me of you and Nikolai at that age. He needs a good ass-whipping from time to time—also like you and Nikolai at that age. Hell, at *this* age, too.” He chuckles when I scowl, then pulls his phone out. “I’ll put the location in your GPS. Looks like forty minutes to get there, give or take. We’ll need reinforcements.”

I nod and accelerate into the left lane. “Text Nikolai. Have him send three teams to the address. They’ll be there faster than we will.”

Dimiv falls silent as he sends Nikolai the text. Once he’s done, he leans back in his seat and takes a deep breath. “America,” he says with a sigh. “It’s been almost eight years since I was here. Can you believe it?”

The last time Dimiv had been in the States was for the funerals. He brought his wife, Dagmara, who was pregnant with their oldest at the time.

“I can’t,” I admit. “Eight years. *Fuck.*” I glance towards him. “I’m sorry I haven’t kept in touch more.”

He waves away my apology. “Fuck that. We don’t need to keep in touch. We’re family.”

I smile. Dimiv has always had my uncle’s sense of loyalty, fierce and unapologetic. It was a bitter loss when he announced to us that he was moving to Russia.

“When are you coming back?”

Dimiv rolls his eyes. “Not this again.”

“You’re needed here. Nikolai and I could really use a man like you.”

“Clearly—I’m a catch, man. But I’ve got a good life in Moscow. The wife’s happy living near her folks. And the boys... Russia is the only home they’ve ever known.”

“If they ever get curious about the States, send them over. I’ll take care of them.”

Dimiv nods. “How about first, we take care of the motherfucker who took Polina?”

My jaw clenches in agreement. “I like the sound of that.”

“Fair warning: based on the dirt I dug up about this Drozdov fucker, he’s nothing but a middleman. He buys girls in the rings and then sells them to wealthy foreign fucks. It’s likely that Polly isn’t at this location. But I’m hoping that there may be someone there who can tell us who Drozdov sold her to.”

“She’s there,” I growl. “I can feel it.”

From my peripheral vision, I can see Dimiv looking at me with a sympathetic expression. I know I probably sound delusional, but blind hope is all I have at the moment.

It’s all any of us have.

The minutes tick past and soon, we’re pulling off the highway. My body is tight with tension. I’m holding the steering wheel so hard that my knuckles have turned white.

“How’s Lev?” asks Dimiv.

“Trying to distract me?”

“Yes. I do genuinely want to know. But yes, I’m trying to distract you.”

I chuckle quietly. “It’s a long story. Same as always in many ways: same hardships, same breakdowns. The nightmares, the paranoia. But in other ways, he’s doing better. Mostly because of Alyssa.”

“Could this be the girl you’ve been seen out and about with?”

I glance at him with raised eyebrows. “You’ve heard of her?”

He nods with a wry grin teasing up one corner of his mouth. “News carries fast and far when you’re the *pahkan* of a

powerful Bratva, cousin. You being seen with her more than once put her on the map. And I keep my ears to the ground.” He rubs a hand across his unshaved chin. “I’m assuming she’s well protected?”

“Nikolai is with her.” I redouble my grip on the steering wheel. “You should know... she’s pregnant. Twins.”

Dimiv’s jaw flops open. “*Fuck.*” He punches my arm. “Congratulations, man! That’s great news. You *are* the father, right? You’re not shooting blanks?”

I throw him a dirty look. “Of course.”

“Just checking. We have to celebrate.”

I glance at the GPS. One more minute and we’ll be at our destination. “We will. As soon as we get Polly back.”

URI

It's over almost before it even began.

I'm embarrassed for them.

We storm the two-story house from all four sides. A tide of Bratva force, bristling with black market weapons and the kind of violent bloodlust that only my soldiers know how to wield. Doors fall, men scream, blood spills.

We're thirty-two strong and Drozdov has only a paltry dozen to defend his life, so scarcely five minutes after we launch the assault, he's backed into a corner of the house, barricaded behind the corpses of the men who died to protect him, not that it did them any good.

I step over an oozing body and look down at the quivering coward.

"W-what do you want from me?" he stammers. His knees give way after he asks the question and he slides to the floor, limp and unresisting.

"Do you know who I am?" I ask. He opens his mouth but nothing comes out. "Answer the question, Drozdov. Because I know who *you* are."

He trembles violently, his lips going as white as the rest of him. "I... I d-don't know. Please just let me go."

"I can't do that. But what I can do is introduce myself." I squat down so that I'm at eye level with him. "My name is Uri Bugrov."

His eyes go wide, his face pale, and I smell the putrid stench of piss as the man's pants darken in front. It just makes me crinkle my nose in disgust. "For someone who likes to buy and sell little girls, I'd have thought you'd be made of stronger stuff."

"Listen—"

"No, *you* listen. You sold my sister. Polina Bugrov. Remember her?" When he doesn't respond, I pull out a gun and press it to the center of his forehead. "I said, '*Remember her*'?"

"Y-yes. Yes! I remember. Please, God, don't shoot."

"Describe her to me."

"G-g-ginger hair. H-hazel eyes. Freckles across the b-b-bridge of her n-nose."

"And young," I snap. "Don't forget that. Who did you sell her to?"

"If I tell you, will you l-let me live?"

"Why don't you tell me what you know and we'll find out?" I press the gun harder to his forehead and he shivers as the cold metal grinds into his skin. Sweat beads around the tip like a little crown of diamonds.

"Oleg Agapov!" he gasps quickly. "P-please don't shoot. I'll d-do anything."

"Oleg Agapov," I repeat. The name sounds familiar.

"He came to me," Drozdov says, talking fast. "Word got around that I had the girl and he entered the bidding war."

"Bidding war?"

Drozdov's eyes flit around the room. He's the last one left. Every single one of his men lies dead or dying around him. "I s-sometimes like to draw out the bidding process. Take a week or two to drive up the price. Y-your sister was p-popular."

"When was she sold to Agapov?"

"Y-yesterday."

"Thanks for your cooperation."

I lower the gun and he sighs in relief. But it's short-lived—the sigh dies on his lips when I headbutt him so hard that his eyes go glassy before rolling back in their sockets.

Disgusted, I mop his sweat off my forehead as I rise back to my feet. “Gag and chain him. Load him up into one of the jeeps. He can join Alan and Sobakin in the shed for now. Where's Dimiv?”

“Downstairs, boss,” Stepan answers, pointing me in his direction. “We found a hatch door leading to the basement. Dimiv was exploring.”

I walk down and make a left. A grimy carpet is rolled up to one side, revealing an open hatch door. I shimmy down through the narrow opening and descend the stairs to the space below. I have to crouch to move beneath the low ceiling.

“Dimiv? You down here?”

“Round the corner,” he calls back.

I follow his voice to a pair of twin beds, each one holding a young girl whose restraints have just been soldered off thanks to Dimiv and two of my men. Both girls are dressed in matching cotton nighties and wearing matching terrified expressions. The one on the left has dark eyes and even darker hair. The one on the right is white-blonde with soft blue irises. Both are bruised to shit. I'd wager every penny I've ever earned that neither is even old enough to drive.

“We're not here to hurt you,” I assure them. “We're going to get you two back to your families.” The girls exchange glances. “But before we do that, I need to ask you some questions first.”

I keep my distance from both of them. They're not likely to be very comfortable around men anymore. They have the unconscious bastard upstairs to thank for that. I intend to make sure he pays for his sins.

“Were there any other girls being held here?” They shake their heads in unison. “When were you brought here?”

“L-last night,” the brunette says softly. “I think. We were drugged. We woke up on these beds.”

Goddammit.

I turn to the side and Dimiv drifts towards me. “They moved Polly before they brought in the new girls,” I explain quietly.

“Did he talk?” Dimiv asks, lowering his voice to match mine.

“Yes. I have a name. Oleg Agapov.”

Dimiv’s eyes go wide. “Agapov? As in the same Agapov family your father ruined before I left?”

Fuck. I knew I recognized the name.

I turn back to the girls. “Do you have homes? Families who’ll be looking for you?”

They shake their heads. Most likely, these girls are from some sketchy part of town, bouncing from one foster home to the next. The kind of girls who slip so easily through the cracks in our world and fall into the hellholes beneath it. Common prey for men like Drozdov, men like Agapov, men like Sobakin. Rats that skitter in that darkness.

“Don’t worry,” he assures me. “I’ve got it covered. I’ll get them somewhere safe and we can make arrangements for them later.”

“Take Stepan with you. He’ll direct you to one of my safehouses on the outskirts of the city. They can stay there for the time being.”

Dimiv plants his hand on my shoulder. “We’ll find her, cousin. I won’t rest until we do.”

Nodding grimly, I step back out again. Now that the smoke has settled, the disappointment sets in. I’d been counting on finding Polly here today. Instead, we have another search on our hands. Another leg of this endless fucking hunt. Even worse, she’s in the hands of her final buyer. God only knows what the sick *mudak* plans to do to her.

I climb into my SUV and signal for the men to follow me to the estate. On the way there, I call Nikolai and fill him in.

He quickly arrives at the same conclusion that Dimiv did. “Oleg Agapov? Aren’t the Agapovs the family that Otets—”

“Yes.”

He hisses in a sharp breath. “*Blyat*’.”

“Are Alyssa and Lev with you?”

“Yes, I’ve been watching them play video games for the last hour. I’m ready to put a bullet in my head. Where are you now?”

“On the way home. I’ve got another ugly ornament for the shed.”

“It’s getting crowded down there.”

“I’m planning on making room. Alan’s served his purpose. He’s just taking up space at this point. Anyway, I’ll be home soon. Start digging up dirt on Oleg Agapov. We need to move fast if we want to get Polly back in one piece.”

Even as I say it, I think about the dead look in the little blonde girl’s eyes from earlier. Life has already destroyed them before they even had a chance to live it.

I hope to God that Polly doesn’t share her fate.

The moment we drive onto the estate, I get my men to haul Drozdov’s limp body into the shed. But as we approach the north gardens, my skin prickles with unease. It’s too empty out here. Too quiet. There should be at least two guards manning this side of the estate. Instead, I see only a lone crow at the top of a distant tree.

“Viktor, Ilya—fan out and check the area. Who was supposed to be on duty today?”

“Fyodor and Anton, I think,” Viktor responds.

I know both men. They’d never leave their posts unless it were a life-or-death situation. I look towards the shed, and—

Fuck. The door is flapping in the wind, the lock sheared clean off.

“There’s been a breach,” I warn my men as I pull out my gun and run down the slope toward the building.

I'm the first one in and the first one down into the basement. The alarm bells in my head were completely accurate. The door to the cell has been broken open and there's blood on the floor. Alan's lying in a pool of the stuff with his tongue lolling out, dead as a rat.

And as for Sobakin...

He's gone.

I rush upstairs and check the security feed. Forty-five minutes ago, it went dark. I grab my phone and call Nikolai.

"Sobakin escaped," I hiss. "He fucking *escaped*." Nikolai starts to ask questions, but I cut him off. "Pack a bag for Alyssa and Lev. It's not safe here anymore. We're leaving."

I stride out of the shed where two of my men have a still-unconscious Drozdov balanced between them. I'd planned on torturing the fucker before I killed him. He deserved a long, drawn-out death befitting someone who bought and sold little girls.

But I have bigger fish to fry now. So I order them to drop him to the ground and step aside. Then I raise my gun and shoot him in the head.

As for Oleg Agapov and Boris Sobakin...

I'm coming for their skulls next.

ALYSSA

As it turns out, Nikolai is just as annoyingly omnipresent as Uri.

He's been watching me like a hawk all evening, which means it's getting harder and harder to hide the growing discomfort in my belly. I asked Dr. Grigory about it when he showed up for my in-house appointment with his massive medical bag in tow, and he assured me that it was normal for me to experience some discomfort, considering I'm almost twenty weeks along and the babies are growing fast.

I'm not worried so much as I am freaking *uncomfortable*. Not to mention tired. It's a ton of work lugging around two extra human beings who insist on stealing all my calories for themselves.

"Are you okay?"

I sigh. It's the tenth time Nikolai has asked me that question. The answer has not changed.

"Why do you keep asking her that?" Lev grumbles without looking up from his video game.

"Yeah, good question, Lev." I glare at Nikolai. "Especially since I've already answered it a bunch of times."

Nikolai just shrugs. "It's my job to take care of you while Uri's away. If anything were to happen, he'll have my head."

"He needs to take a chill pill. And so do you."

“And *you* need to tell me if anything’s wrong. You’ve been squirming in that seat for the last hour.”

“It’s just gas.” He snorts with laughter. Even Lev lets out a distracted giggle. “Honestly, Nikolai, I’m fine. I’m just having twins; it’s uncomfortable. That’s all.”

“What did Grigory say during your check-up?”

“That I was healthy. And so are the babies.”

“Did he give you more supplements?”

“A whole bottle full. The joys of pregnancy. Can’t wait to add those to the regimen.”

“Did he check your blood pressure?”

“Totally normal.”

That part’s not exactly true, but I don’t want to worry either Nikolai or Uri. The truth is, my blood pressure reading was a few points over the norm. Apparently, I’m stressing out too much. But until Polly’s back home with her family, I don’t think that’s likely to change.

“Are you hungry?”

“No. But I am getting more and more irritated by the second.”

He rolls his eyes. “Okay, message received. I’ll stop with the inquisition.”

“Bless you.”

He smirks and goes back to picking at his nails. Nervous habit? I’m not sure, but as I watch him closely, I sense that he definitely seems a little on edge. It can’t be just because of me.

“Is there something I should know?” I ask suddenly.

“Hm?”

I narrow my eyes. “Nikolai.”

He sighs and glances at Lev, who seems too focused on his game to pay any attention to us. Still, Nikolai leaves his armchair and comes to sit down beside me. “Uri got a credible lead about where Polly might be,” he whispers to me.

I gasp and clap both hands over my mouth. “You’re joking. Really?”

He nods. “He’s on his way there with our cousin, Dimiv.”

“I didn’t know you guys had a cousin. I’ve never seen him around here.”

“He lives in Russia. He moved there a decade ago because his wife was homesick.”

“But he’s here now?”

“Flew in overnight. Uri told him about Polly and he came to help.”

“Wow. That’s good of him.”

“That’s family.”

I nod, automatically clutching my charm bracelet the way I do whenever that word gets brought up lately. “It’s ride-or-die, huh? I remember how that felt.” I swallow back the lump in my throat.

“Ziva is not your only family anymore, Alyssa,” Nikolai says softly. “You have a whole new family now.”

“I know.” I glance down at my stomach. “Problem is, my family insists on giving me heartburn, both from the inside and out.”

He doesn’t laugh at my lame joke. He just covers my hand with his and fixes him with that gaze that’s so eerily similar to Nikolai’s. “I mean it, Alyssa. You aren’t alone anymore. You’ll never be alone again.”

Against my wishes, my eyes fill with tears and I have to bite down on my tongue to keep them from spilling out. “Thanks, Nikolai. That means a lot to me.”

His mouth twitches. “Are you getting all misty-eyed on me?”

“Hormones,” I say quickly. “Don’t get any ideas.”

He laughs. “*Sure*. Hormones. We’ll go with that.”

I give him a playful whack on the arm. “Uri’s lucky to have a brother like you, you know.”

“Tell *him* that,” he drawls with a bemused snort.

I smile. “He already knows. Even if he doesn’t always show it.”

“It’s my fault.” He leans back and scrubs a hand down the side of his face. “I can get... insecure about our roles in this Bratva, in this family. Even though I’m the older brother, he’s obviously the alpha.”

I shrug. “So he’s the *pahkan* or whatever. You’re still the older brother. And as far as I’m concerned, you’re a damn good one, too.”

A buzzing sound interrupts us. Nikolai looks down at his phone. “Speak of the devil. Excuse me for a second.”

He gets up and walks to the door. He talks low, so I can’t make out exactly what he’s saying. But I do catch the edge of disappointment in his voice.

“... it’s getting crowded down there... yeah, okay. See you soon.” He hangs up and walks back to me. “Polly wasn’t there. But we know who has her now.”

I sit upright. “Is that where Uri is going now?”

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple. We’ll have to figure out how to rescue Polly. The man who bought her isn’t exactly the reasonable type.”

I frown. “What type is he?”

“The type who wants revenge,” Nikolai says with a sigh. “My father is responsible for killing his entire family back in the day.”

My eyes go wide. “W-what?”

“They were a small-time outfit at the time. Oleg Agapov’s dad was in charge and he and my father got into a ton of territory disputes. It could have been settled with a little cash and some decent negotiations, but Gavril Agapov decided to fight dirty.”

“How?”

“He tried to kill my mother and make it look like an accident.” My jaw drops. He’s relaying the story so casually, too. It’s making my hair stand on end. “Of course, my mother was not so easy to kill. She jumped out of the moving car and clocked the man driving after her. Recognized him as one of Agapov’s men. The next week, the Agapov family was all but ash. Oleg and his younger sister were spared only because they were children.” Nikolai looks me in the eye. “No one fucks with this family and lives to tell the tale.”

“Jeez. When you guys tell stories like that, all I can think is that I’m glad you’re on my side.” He laughs and I squirm in my seat. “Nikolai, I really need a shower. I’m going down, okay?”

“Do you need any help—”

“*No.*”

He holds up his hands, palms out to placate me. “I was going to offer to walk you down the stairs. Not shower.”

“Can never be too careful with the Bugrov brothers. You two have a habit of overdoing it. Just stay here with Lev. I need a couple minutes.”

“I’ll come down to check on you in ten.”

“Twenty.”

“Fifteen. Final offer.”

“So annoying,” I mumble as I wobble unsteadily towards the door. His laughter follows me all the way down the hall.

I breathe a sigh of relief when I get to my room and I’m able to strip down. Throwing off my clothes is liberating, not least of which is because my body temperature is straight-up haywire these days and I’m sweating like a pig. I crank the water on and adjust the temperature until it’s cool and soothing. Then I get in, ready to soak down my blood pressure for fifteen minutes.

Knowing Nikolai, though, I’ll be lucky to get half that.

I’ve just soaked my hair when my bathroom door is thrown open. Thinking it’s Nikolai, I scream and grab my towel—but

then I freeze when I see it's Uri.

“My God! You scared me.” The look on his face is bleak. It definitely doesn't help my blood pressure. He opens the shower door and turns off the water. “Uri...?”

“Get out now,” he orders. “And get dressed.”

My brow ripples with unease. “Why?”

“Because we're leaving. It's not safe here anymore.”

URI

“*This* is our ‘bare bones hideaway spot’?” Alyssa is gawking at the cabin like she’s never seen Scandinavian architecture and exposed timber before. Her hair is still damp from the shower and twisted into a long tail over her shoulder. I want nothing more than to wrap it around my hand and coax her down...

Grimacing, I haul a bag onto each shoulder and nod. “Do you have a complaint you’d like to voice, *narushitel?*”

She shakes her head in disbelief. “You said we’d have to ‘rough it for a while.’”

“The cabin has only six rooms and no staff quarters. So we’ll have to cook and clean up after ourselves.”

If her eyes rolled back in their sockets any farther, they’d get stuck there permanently. “You poor man. How ever will you survive?”

I roll my own eyes in return as Dimiv comes up around the corner just in time to chime in. “Uri may be good in the kitchen, but he’s never lifted a broom in his life.”

Alyssa turns to him. “You must be Dimiv.”

“And you must be the famous Alyssa. Practically glowing, I see.”

“Aren’t you the charmer?” she says with a shy smile. “Are you sure you’re related to these two?”

He chuckles and nudges me with an elbow. “I like her, Uri.”

“Of course you do. Fucking figures. How about you make yourself useful for once and grab a bag?”

He’s reaching for one of the duffels on the stone path that leads to the cabin when a long, strangled scream comes from inside the SUV. Alyssa whips around. “Shit!” she yelps. “Lev.”

“No, I don’t wanna get out!”

Nikolai is still in there with him, begging and pleading to get our brother to set so much as one toe out of the vehicle. “Lev, come on. It’s not so bad. It’s actually pretty great. Can you smell all the trees?”

I arch a skeptical eyebrow. “Can *you* smell the trees?”

Nikolai shoots me a glare. “Do you want to try getting him out, wiseass?”

“I’ll try,” Alyssa interjects, pushing both me and Nikolai out of the way. “Hey, Lev, it’s me. I checked out the place. It looks amazing.”

“I don’t wanna see it.” Through the dark tint, I can just barely make out the silhouette of him hunched over, chin tucked to chest, arms folded across his body like it’ll keep him safe from the dangerous dual threats of pine trees and fresh air.

“But if we don’t go in now and pick our rooms, then everyone else will choose the best ones. You don’t want that to happen, do you?”

Silence. Nikolai and I exchange a glance. Surely he won’t...

“Fine,” Lev says and the next thing, I know he’s putting his hand in Alyssa’s and emerging from the car.

She pulls him out of the SUV and walks him up to the house. He only spares a passing glance at Dimiv, who stands back in dumbfounded silence to let them pass. All three of us come together to watch the two of them disappear into the cabin.

“My God in heaven above,” Dimiv breathes. “How did she manage to do that?”

Nikolai sighs. “She’s good with him.”

Dimiv turns to me with raised eyebrows. “You really hit the jackpot with that one.”

My chest expands suddenly with a prickly warmth that feels an awful lot like pride. “Quit gawking and help me with these bags, *mudaks*.”

The inside of the cabin is just like I remember it. Gable roof with bright exposed beams, a hand-built stone fireplace looming huge in the center of the living room, large windows with timber frames lining the walls that face the valley. The antlers from a stag that Uncle Petyr shot one winter are still hanging on the wall, opposite a collection of hunting knives from my father’s youth.

So many memories buried in the woodwork here. Lev took his first steps across the bearskin rug on the hearth. Polly blew out her first birthday candles on that rough-hewn table. I remember how hard it was snowing outside, and how little we cared about such things.

“It feels weird being back without her,” Nikolai murmurs as though he’s read my mind.

I glance over at him. “We’re going to get her back.”

“I know.”

Nikolai and Dimiv converge around me. It feels like old times, except that I’m the one in charge. My father isn’t here anymore; it’s just us now. Polina needs the best we have to offer.

So I calm myself down with a steadying breath. I leave everything else outside of me and focus inward.

“Do we have a location on Agapov?” I ask.

Dimiv nods. “I’ve got a man doing a search on the bastard as we speak.”

“Kruger is doing the same,” Nikolai says. “We should get coordinates soon.”

“Good. I don’t want to waste any time. As soon as we have a spot, we go in hot, guns blazing. I’m getting my sister back today. No matter what. If we can—”

Ping.

I glance between Nikolai and Dimiv, but it's the latter who pulls his phone out. "There it is. Oleg Agapov is holed up in a three-storey house in Calabasas."

"Then that's where we're going."

I'm halfway to the door, Dimiv and Nikolai flanking me, when I hear her voice from the top of the staircase. "Uri." Alyssa is standing at the mezzanine, looking down at me with wide eyes filled with worry.

I glance towards Nikolai and Dimiv. "Wait for me outside. I'll only be a minute." I take the steps two at a time until I reach her. "Is Lev okay?"

"Fine. He picked one of the loft bedrooms," she says without emotion. "Are you...?"

I nod in confirmation. "Call Stepan or Mikhail if you need anything. The moment we leave the cabin, change the security code. No one will be able to get in unless you give them the combination."

"Y-you're leaving?" She's pale and shaky.

I cup her face. "I'm going to get Polly. It's time we bring her home."

She nods but she's biting on her bottom lip at the same time. "It's going to be dangerous, isn't it?"

"Nothing I can't handle."

Alyssa places her hand over the hand I've got cupping her cheek. "Bring Polly back," she begs softly. "And bring yourself back, too. In one piece."

I press my lips to hers. When I pull away, I look her in the eye. "I can do that."

Then I head back downstairs to the SUV where Dimiv and Nikolai are waiting for me. I climb into the passenger's seat and punch the ceiling. "Let's get this shit over with."

URI

When we get to Agapov's estate, my men already have it surrounded, but they're still far enough away from the security cameras to remain unseen. I get out of the SUV and huddle up with the leaders of each team.

"Stepan?"

"The front gates are high. South-facing walls are lower, more scalable. I think that's the way we go."

I nod. "South it is. Guards?"

"Four manning the front entrance, two at the back. As far as I can tell, one of the two is asleep. Has been for the past half-hour."

"What about cameras?"

"Lots of them, pointed in every goddamn direction under the sun. Outside the property, at the gardens, at the house itself. I scoped the security station earlier and I suspect there are booby traps that trigger silent alarms in the main house if there's a breach at the entrance gates."

I glance towards Dimiv and Nikolai. "If we go in guns blazing, we're giving Agapov and his men time to either run with Polly or hurt her. The longer we can go without triggering any alarms, the better."

Nikolai's forehead is creased with lines. "How do you propose to do that?"

I'm gonna take a page from Alyssa's trespassing guidebook...

... *minus the underwear.*

“I’m going to go over to the south entrance, scale the wall, and disable the security cameras so that you all can get inside.”

Nikolai balks. “I think someone else should—”

“It wasn’t a question, *brat*. I was simply informing you of my plans.” I stand and crack the knuckles on each hand. “Stay here; wait for my signal. If the gates open, move fast and quiet. If you hear a gunshot or any sign of commotion, you attack. Take no prisoners. That clear?”

All of the gathered men nod in deference. Dimiv pulls out his gun. Nikolai is the only one who doesn’t move.

“Brother?”

“I’m not sure we should be sending in the most important member of this Bratva into the lion’s den.” He steps towards me. “Uri, you are the *pahkan*. Your life is more important than mine. Let me go instead.”

I put my hand on his shoulder. “I know I don’t say this often enough, but... you’re a good second, Nikolai Bugrov. And you’re an even better brother. But you forget, *I’m* the lion. I can handle this.”

He relents with a reluctant sigh. I don’t wait for him to fish for any other lines of argument—the time to move is now.

So, with one final breath, I’m off and running.

I stick to the shadows around the perimeter of the estate. Halfway along the southern wall, I see a pair of trees leaning over the barricade. That’s as good a way up as any, I decide.

You can do this.

For Polly.

I take two deep, measured breaths. Then I charge.

I jump, catch the lowest-hanging branch, and vault myself up toward the wall. I misjudge just enough that I slam into the wall and knock the wind from my lungs, though my hands still manage to grasp the upper lip. It’s a strain to pull my weight up, but I do, getting one leg over, then the other.

I pause at the top. The night is silent and still. Shadows move in the far distance as the patrols circulate, but none of them cast any attention in my direction.

This is how Alyssa must've felt. Whether she knew it or not, she was poised between two lives while she hung on that fence. There was no going back—all she could do was delay how long until the next chapter began.

I don't intend to delay a goddamn thing.

I leap down and land gracefully on the grass at my feet. Twisting around, I clock the security station. Fifty meters away, give or take. So far, nothing seems amiss. There's no sign that my entry has been noticed. I belly crawl my way towards the station through the thickets of grass.

As I get closer, I hear the whistle of a snore. *Sweet dreams, motherfucker.* I pull out the Swiss army knife hidden in my boot and slide it across the bastard's neck. Blood sprays out like a garden sprinkler, but the man never wakes up. He slumps into his seat, maintaining the same position in death that he had in sleep.

I get to my feet and sneak a peek inside the security station. There's one other guard in there with his back to me. I step into the doorway and dispatch him with a quick stab into the carotid. Before he can fall over onto the control panel, I loop a hand under his arm and across his chest, then drag him out into the night and dump him behind a hedge.

When I return to the station, I tuck my knife away and get to work.

It's quick business to use the dead man's hand to unlock the controls. From there, I navigate to the monitor feeds and disable them one by one. Dozens of screens go black. Exterior lights extinguish. Not a single alarm makes a peep.

I power down the system and, last but not least, open the front entrance. Through the one-way glass of the security booth, I see the gates slowly begin to part like sideways metal lips.

I screw a silencer onto my gun and creep back out into the darkness. A trio of shadows—more of Agapov's guards—are

millling around in confusion, barking into radios that no longer work as they try to figure out who the hell opened the gates.

Two of them die before they ever get an answer. The third figures out where the bullets are coming from and starts to turn, but only enough that my kill shot catches him in the eye instead of the back of the skull. He goes the same way as the rest of his comrades: down, never to get back up again.

Nikolai is the first one of my men through the gates. His grin is lit up by the moonlight, white and excited. “Nice work, brother,” he calls ahead.

But I’m frowning. Something prickles at me. Something wrong in my math, my approach. I’m wracking my brain, trying to figure out what it—

Wait.

Didn’t Stepan say there were four guards at the main entrance? I’ve killed one, two, three...

I turn in time to see the forgotten guard sprinting into the house.

“*Blyat*’,” I growl. “He’s going to alert them all. Let’s go!”

We’re racing towards the house when I see the windows overhead being opened. “Take cover!” I roar. But my voice is drowned out by the scream of gunshots.

In the midst of all the chaos, I hear a high, shrill scream.

Her scream.

Polly.

URI

Only one question matters now: did I come this far just to watch her die?

The answer is obvious.

Hell.

Fucking.

No.

With my heart in my throat, I follow my sister's scream, charging as fast as I can through the house in search of her.

My men fan out around me, covering me while I sprint up to the second floor. A man runs out from behind a door, taking me by surprise, and I just barely manage to elbow him in the face. I hear the crunch of cartilage and he falls backwards onto his spine.

I bend down and press my gun against his forehead as I snarl, "Talk or you die. Where the fuck is your boss?"

His eyes are wide with terror. "Down the hall! The last room on your right."

"Good man." I give him an approving nod and then pull the trigger. He flops backwards, his blood spilling out onto the wool carpet.

I'm tearing down the hallway when another pair of men emerge from a room on the left. I dodge a bullet by a hair's breadth and answer back in kind. My shot misses the first soldier but it hits the second one in the chest.

I'm turning to get a better line of attack on the lead man when another scream distracts me.

“Aargh! No!”

My blood goes cold. *Polly*. It's definitely her. I'm so close—but there's still one bastard rushing at me and two others following behind him. They're like ants pouring out of the woodwork, endless and inhuman.

I feint to the side and get my bare hands on the man closest. I twist him around and use him as a human shield. He twitches spastically as he takes a hail of bullets that was meant for me. When the onslaught stops so the shooters can reload, I make my move.

One falls to a bullet of mine. Another catches my elbow in his windpipe and flails backwards as he struggles to draw in a breath he'll never catch. The third, when he rises up to take aim again, gets my knife hurled into his open mouth.

Dead. Dead. Dead.

But it's not enough. Not fast enough, not soon enough, not *enough* enough—because I still don't have Polly.

I leave the corpses behind and keep rushing down the hallway in the direction of her scream. The last door is closed. I put my shoulder into it, but it doesn't yield. So I back up, unload a clip into the locking mechanism, and then try again.

This time, it gives way.

I burst into the room in an explosion of wood splinters and hot metal fragments. I'm just in time to see Oleg Agapov throw one foot out an open window. He's got an arm wrapped around Polly's neck in a chokehold and her face is turning a nasty shade of blue. She's clawing at his arm with her nails but he seems oblivious as he tries to drag her through the window with him.

Not on my fucking watch.

I cross the room in a single stride, grip Oleg's fingers where he's clamped down on my sister's throat, and tear them

backwards. Shit breaks, lots of it, his bones cracking like popsicle sticks in my grasp. His scream is music to my ears.

Caught awkwardly with one leg on the windowsill, Oleg collapses. Polly wrenches herself free and stumbles to the corner of the room, her body going slack as she slides to the ground and buries her face in her hands.

I haul Agapov up by the collar and send my fist flying into his nose. He takes the first punch like a man.

The third, fourth, fifth, tenth, though? Not so much.

His mouth is a mass of blood and spit and both his eyes have already swollen shut by the time more footsteps join us.

Polly screams but then I hear Nikolai's voice. "Hey, it's okay. It's just us."

I turn to Nikolai and Dimiv, who're standing by the door with a handful of men behind them. I drop Oleg in disgust. "Cuff that *mudak* and bring him. I'm not done with him yet."

My soldiers swarm forward to do just that while I approach Polly, who's still got her face covered. She's balled herself up in the corner of the room and she's shivering violently. "Pol," I say gently. "Polly, it's me. Uri."

She peeks out from behind her hands. She looks like she's seeing a ghost.

"I'm sorry it took me so long," I continue. "But I'm here. You're safe now."

Her eyes stay glued on me, wondering if she can trust that I'm real. Then her face crumples and she starts to sob. Her knees drop and her hands rise and I lean forward so that I can catch her. She falls into my arms, clinging to my shoulders and sobbing on my neck.

"I'm sorry," I say again and again. "I'm so fucking sorry."

I hold her until she's calmed down. When her sobs start to quiet, I talk to her gently, the way I used to when she was a little girl and she used to cry for our mother.

“You’re going to be alright. I won’t let anything or anyone hurt you again. I promise.” I run my hand over the back of her head while I talk.

After a few last hiccupping sobs, she pulls away from me so that she can look up at my face. “Thanks for coming for me.”

I stroke her face. She’s lost a lot of weight. Her cheeks have caved in and her eyes look huge. I scan her body fast, checking for injuries or any signs of torture but she looks relatively unscathed. Physically speaking, at least. There’s no telling what they did to the inside of her head.

Nikolai pops a squat in front of us. “Hey, kiddo. You have no idea how good it is to see you.” His voice catches and wobbles.

Polly reaches out and slips her hand into his. Then her eyes veer to Dimiv. “Who’re you?”

“You remember Dimiv? Our cousin.”

He smiles kindly. “You were seven years old when I last saw you.”

She blinks a couple of times, releasing fresh tears. The relief of seeing her, touching her, knowing that she’s under my protection again—it’s a drink of water after weeks in the desert.

I pick her up and get to my feet. “You’re going with Nikolai, okay? I’m just going to clean up in here.”

She flinches but she doesn’t ask any questions. Nikolai steps up and scoops her into his arms. It breaks my heart how easily she lets him.

The only discernible mark that I can see are the bruises around her wrists. But I know better than anyone that sometimes, the worst scars are the ones that can’t be seen. My stomach caves in when I think about what she must have endured before we’d shown up.

But I still can’t help but feel relief. Now that she’s safe, I can admit to myself that there was a part of me that had been

preparing for the worst. For the possibility that she might have been lost to us forever.

“Get her warm and safe. Stay with her until I come down.”

Nikolai nods and leaves without argument. Just before he turns the corner, I see Polly’s eyes flit to Oleg. When a flicker of fear passes over them, I clench my jaw.

He’s about to pay for what he did to my family.

“I never pegged you for a smart man, Oleg,” I hiss as I pull out my knife. It’s still coated with his blood, but there is plenty of that yet to come. “But I didn’t think you were this stupid.”

He’s spluttering awake as one of my men pours water into his face. “Your father cost me my entire family.”

“Only because *your* father was stupid enough to make an attempt on my mother’s life,” I remind him icily. “If you’re going to start a war with the Bugrov Bratva, get your facts straight.”

“L-listen... I just... It was a scare tactic, okay? I didn’t touch her. No one did. You can take her back and we can forget this whole—*FUCK!*” He stops his lies when I stab him in the leg, making sure that the knife carves deep enough to meet bone. “*Fuck, fuck... please stop... s-stop...*”

I pull the knife back out and he gasps dramatically. “‘Forget’?” I laugh bitterly. “If only I could make Polly ‘forget’ what you put her through. But I can’t do that, can I?”

“I-it was all just a mistake... a m-misunderstanding... please...”

“You buy and sell little girls, Oleg. Pleading is not going to help you now. Nothing will.” I toss my knife in the air and let it rotate once before the handle lands back in my palm. “Your day of reckoning has come.”

“No, no, no... *aah, no, fuck. NO!*”

I take my time carving him up. I know where to go to maximize the pain and minimize the blood loss. Every time he tries to pass out, I pour more water into his face and slap his cheeks until he stirs. Then I get right back to work.

Dimiv pulls out his own blade as he kneels at my side. “Mind if I join? I’ve got some ideas for this little operation.”

Oleg’s eyes go wide. Sweat and blood mix together as he tries to crawl away as much as his restraints will allow.

“No, don’t do this... please...”

“There is no mercy for men like you, Oleg,” I tell him grimly. “Your end has come—”

There are red veins pulsing through the whites of his eyes. He opens his mouth and lets out a strangled scream as Dimiv’s knife sinks into his right eyeball.

“—and it’s gonna be fucking *slow*.”

ALYSSA

URI: *We've got her.*

The message came in over an hour ago and I still can't stop looking at it. Lev has already asked me why I couldn't seem to put my phone down. I distracted him with video games and an extra hour of TV time before insisting that he went to bed.

I'm just stepping out of his room when I hear the purr of an engine. Gasping, I rush downstairs and peek out the window.

It's them.

I spy Nikolai and Uri emerge from one side of the SUV—but still no Polly.

Quickly, I punch in the code and push the door open. They troop in one by one, all looking weary but calm. The last in is Uri and he has Polly in his arms. She's clinging to him tightly, looking fragile as ever in a thin, sleeveless slip that hangs off her bony frame.

Her face is hidden in Uri's chest. At first, I assume she's sleeping. But then I notice her head lift once the door's shut.

"Polly."

Her head snaps in my direction. Her eyes go wide. "You're starting to show," she whispers softly.

I promised myself I wouldn't cry, but I'm losing that battle already. I venture towards her, unsure if I should touch her or not. I want to, just to make sure she's real, that she's really here.

“I’m so sorry. I’m so glad you’re home.”

She nods but says nothing.

Uri goes upstairs with her. I follow along, then rush ahead so I can open the door to one of the empty bedrooms.

He is about to set her down on the duvet when she starts frantically shaking her head. “No. Don’t! I’m so dirty. I don’t want to touch anything.”

“It doesn’t matter, Polly.”

“It does. It *does*,” she insists with a fervor that reminds me of Lev. “I’m dirty.”

Uri looks at me helplessly and I feel his pain. I rush forward and put my hand on Polly’s arm. “I can get you cleaned up, Polly. Would you be okay with that?”

She stares at me. Those eyes are huge and scared, flitting side to side like they see things in the shadows that no one else can see.

“Come on,” I say to Uri. “Let’s take her to the bathroom.”

He scoops her up again and carries her in before gently settling her on the side of the tub where I point. “Thank you. I’ll take it from here.” He glances at me and I can see the turmoil raging in his eyes. I slide my hand up and down his back. “It’s okay; I’ll take care of her. Pinky promise.”

With a solemn nod, he slips out quietly, leaving Polly with me.

I turn on the faucet, making sure it’s hot before I add bubbles and bath salts. Polly watches me wordlessly. Those eyes of hers never stop moving. Like she’s gotten so used to checking for demons in the shadows that she doesn’t know how to stop now.

Once the tub is filled, I turn to her. “Ready to get clean?”

I help her undress, dumping her ruined clothes right into the trash can. Then, with one hand on her back and another holding hers, I lower her into the bathtub. A trembling breath passes her lips as she sinks below the surface of the suds.

She closes her eyes and sighs deeply. She doesn't say a thing and I decide not to break the silence until she's ready.

After about thirty minutes or so have passed, the water's started to go cold. "Are you ready to come out?" I ask.

She shakes her head immediately. "No. Not yet."

I run the tap again to refresh the warm water. When I cut it back off, the silence seems denser than ever. She shudders against the comforting swirls of steam that rise out of the tub.

"Who knew heaven was a tub of hot water?" she croaks.

I sit by the side of the tub and trail my fingers through the water, making ripples in the soapy crests and valleys.

"Alyssa..." I raise my head when she says my name. "Why aren't we home?"

I consider telling her the truth, but I don't want her to worry about Sobakin. She's had enough worry for a lifetime already. "It's just an extra safety measure that your brother decided to take. We'll be back at the estate in no time, I'm sure." She's still wary, so I clear my throat and add, "Uri said you used to come here when you were very little."

She nods. "I remember it from pictures. Feels like another lifetime ago. Everything does."

I grab her hand, intertwining her pruney fingers with mine. "If you want to talk about it, you know I'm here for you."

"I know. I just... I don't think I can just yet." Her bottom lip trembles. "I was so scared that I'd never see any of you again."

"Me, too," I admit. "The last few weeks without you were torture. I'm so glad you're back, Pol. I'm so glad you're safe."

We fall quiet again. The only sound is her breathing and mine and the plinking of water against the sides of the tub. Then her stomach rumbles.

I smile. "Can I get you anything to eat?"

"Chocolate," she mumbles. "I kept dreaming about chocolate."

I get to my feet, grateful for something to do. “You got it. I’ll be right back, okay?”

Uri is the only one in the kitchen when I get there. He looks up at me in alarm, more scared than I’ve ever seen him before. “Is she... Did he...?”

I shake my head. “She’s hurting, but I think... I think she’ll be okay.” I step closer to him and cup his face. “You’re an amazing brother, Uri. You brought her back home.”

“But is it too late?” he wonders.

I shake my head again. “She’s still in there. She’s just been through a lot. We need to give her time. We need to be there for her.”

“Thank you, Alyssa,” he says quietly, his eyes heavy with the weight of his words. “For taking care of my sister as though she’s your own.”

I place my hand on my stomach. “These babies make us family now.”

He bends down and kisses me gently on the lips. And for the first time in weeks, this kiss is free from guilt or sadness or fear.

This kiss feels like a new beginning.

It feels like hope.

URI

Alyssa radiates exhaustion when she slips into our room that night. That's clear enough even in the dark. There's moonlight streaming in through the gable windows and it pours onto her face. She looks like an angel. A tired angel, yes, but still as beautiful as the diamond-encrusted sky outside.

I lean off to the side and turn on the bedside lamp. She yelps and whips around in place. "You're awake," she murmurs when she sees me.

"Couldn't sleep."

The truth is, I *could* sleep. Tonight is the first night in forever that I feel like I could close my eyes and pass out for days and days.

I just didn't want to sleep without her.

"How's she doing?" I ask instead of saying any of that.

"Sleeping."

She starts undressing, shucking off her dress and discarding it onto the divan in front of the bed. When she turns to the side, I admire her silhouette. She's so gorgeous in the half-shadows, in the beams and patches of silvery moonglow. She's flawed and flawless and perfect and mine.

As she crawls into bed, she adds, "It took a while. She was tired, but I think she's scared to sleep. Nightmares."

I nod, doing my damndest to ignore my stiffening erection. "Understandable."

“I think she was relieved to be in normal clothes,” Alyssa mumbles. “She ate a lot, though it took a while. Then we stayed up talking for a bit. I did most of the talking. It just felt like she wanted to listen to normal things. Household things, pregnancy things. Stuff that can’t hurt her. I—”

When she interrupts herself with a yawn, I raise my eyebrows. “You need rest, too, Alyssa.”

Her face screws up with irritation. “Polly needs me, Uri. She has to come first for a while.”

“You’re pregnant.”

“I’m fine.”

Her fierceness gives me just an inkling of the kind of mother she’s going to be. Strong, independent, deeply protective. A mama bear in the making. A lioness guarding her young.

“Don’t worry about Polly tonight. She’s just down the hall. If she has nightmares, I’ll be there.”

A guilty furrow appears in Alyssa’s brow. “I doubt she’ll have nightmares tonight.” Biting her bottom lip, she admits, “I... may have mixed a sleeping pill into her bedtime tea.”

I let out an impressed laugh. “Never thought I’d see the day.”

She clutches uncertainly at my elbow. “I just want her to get a decent night’s sleep. Did you see those dark circles? No fourteen-year-old should have dark circles that bad.”

“Breathe, *kiska*. I don’t disagree. You did the right thing.”

She looks up at me and traces her fingertip down the cliff of my jaw. “Speaking of dark circles, you need to sleep, too.”

I push her back onto the bed, my lips sliding down to her breasts. “Sleep is not what I’m interested in right now.”

She lets out a soft giggle. “Seriously? After the day you’ve had?”

I let my tongue loll over her nipple. “This is *exactly* what I need after the day I’ve had.”

Her fingers slide into my hair as I tease her nipples into hard peaks. She writhes around underneath me, teasing my cock with her soft warmth, with the grinding of her hips and the mewling little exhales that slip past her lips. Then I slide down lower and start passing my tongue up and down her wet pussy.

“Aah,” she gasps. “Yes... yes... like that... mmm...”

Once her juices start flowing onto my tongue, I circle her clit until she’s on the brink of orgasm. Then I push myself up onto my arms so that I can guide my cock inside her.

I have to grit my teeth to keep from letting loose like I normally would. Everything about her begs me to unleash the carnal part of my brain. The part that wants to fuck her as hard as I can. I want to burn her up from the inside out. Make her head explode, just so she can feel for even one second how I feel every second of every day I spend with her.

But for as long as she’s pregnant, exploding heads is precisely what I have to avoid. So I control myself. I look down at the beautiful woman beneath me who has somehow managed to work her way into my head and heart, and I put her needs above my own. I curb all my own desires and focus on hers.

Never thought I’d see *that* day, either.

She clenches tight around me. “Uri,” she breathes, her eyes fluttering open and closed again and again. “*God*, I love... this.”

For a second there, I was sure she was about to end that sentence differently. It’s bizarre how my body thrills at the thought. How my skin seems punctured with excitement, my extremities buzzing with need.

Love was not on my radar before now. I saw my parents love each other and lose each other. I saw Dimiv give up his entire life here for a quiet one in Moscow. Love is a liability, not an asset.

And besides, plenty of women have passed through this room before Alyssa, but I never cared about a single one. So what makes her so special?

Answers flood my brain.

Her kindness. Her patience. Her compassion. Her capacity to forgive. Her bravery. That blush. Those maternal instincts. The sight of a grinning orange cat peeking out from where her thighs meet...

She starts thrusting her hips upwards to meet mine. “More,” she moans, her head tossing to the side, fanning the side of her face with sun-kissed strands of hair. “Yes, *Uri*... harder, please. Harder.”

“It’s not safe,” I say, bending my lips to her ear and licking the lobe. “You know what the doctors said.”

“Fuck the doctors,” she snaps. “Take me like you want me.”

She starts thrusting upwards harder, faster and I think I’m gonna lose my mind. The woman is relentless, undeniable, and completely out of my control. I didn’t ask for love and I didn’t ask for a wild woman—but somehow, I’ve found myself falling for both.

The moment she starts to clench around my cock, choking out all rational thought, I erupt inside her. My whole body roils with shivers as I give it two more savage thrusts before rolling onto the bed.

“Ahhh,” she sighs dreamily. “That was amazing.”

Her eyes are closed when I turn to her. She’s breathing softly, a small smile playing at the corners of her lips. I want to freeze her right here, right like this. I want it etched in marble so I can stare at her to my heart’s content.

But I can’t freeze time just yet. Our story isn’t over. It might only just be beginning. Because I can’t rest easy while there is someone out there who’s hunting me down, desperate to rip all this away from me.

For me to be able to breathe again... Sobakin needs to die.

I sit upright and see that Alyssa has fallen asleep already. I press a kiss to her cheek and cover her properly with the blanket. Then I twist off the bedside lamp, grab my phone and clothes, and sneak out of the room.

I can hear laughter floating down the corridor as I dress in the dark and close the door behind me. I walk downstairs to find Dimiv and Nikolai once again on the back porch, sipping vodka and smoking cigars.

“Come, brother,” Nikolai calls over when he sees me. “Join us.”

For some reason, seeing them this relaxed pisses me off. “I’ve got work to do.”

Both of them turn in their seats to look at me. Nikolai’s smile falters but Dimiv gives me a carefree wink. “We got Polly back. Today was a victory, cousin. Come and celebrate with us.”

I shake my head. “Don’t you get it? Sobakin is still out there. Someone helped him escape. Someone on the inside. Which means we’re vulnerable.”

Dimiv looks too drunk to care. “That’s tomorrow’s problem, eh?”

“No, it’s today’s. Tonight’s. And it’s only going to get bigger the longer we put it off. The two of you can go ahead and celebrate—but until Sobakin is dead, I’m not celebrating shit. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got work to do.”

I turn and walk away, leaving them sitting on the porch in a far less celebratory mood than when I found them. A part of me feels like an asshole. Another part of me feels justified in my annoyance.

I suppose they get to take some time off, unwind, talk, laugh. The weight of responsibility doesn’t sit on their shoulders; it sits on *mine*.

I’m the *pahkan*. I don’t have the same luxuries.

I step into the study at the far end of the ground floor. I pull out my phone to find a message there from Kruger.

Sobakin’s trail has gone cold. It’s like the man disappeared into thin air. I’ll keep looking and if I find anything, you’ll be the first to know.

“Fuck,” I mumble.

I look out the exposed windows at the mass of waving trees before me. I have to protect them all, all the innocent lives hiding out behind these walls. If I can't, then who am I? What is the point of my crown if my kingdom is open to any vulture who wants to rip off a hunk of it for themselves?

I walk over to the window. I've been trying to do this single-handedly from the moment Lev was taken. But true strength is admitting when you need help.

I may be the *pahkan*, but I can't protect the family all by myself.

Perhaps the first step to victory is accepting that.

ALYSSA

Uri won't allow any of us to leave the cabin. It's a beautiful hideaway, but with six of us living in it and a limited number of things to do, it's quickly starting to wear on everyone's nerves. Especially after a week of confinement.

There's also the fact that both Lev and Polly are having trouble adjusting. For Lev, it's a break in his usual routine, a change of environment he wasn't prepared for. He misses Svetlana and George and his video games and the blackout curtains over his windows.

For Polly, it's about reorienting to life outside the confines of captivity. It's about shedding the fear she's been carrying with her for the last few weeks. It's about trying to process what she's been through.

I've taken to sleeping with her most nights now. The nightmares came back after the sleeping pill wore off and it's not like we can drug her every night. I know Uri is bothered that we rarely sleep together, but he doesn't say a word. He just wears that pinched grimace on his face that seems to read, *Whatever she needs is what must happen.*

Polly isn't the only one who's having trouble sleeping. I spend most nights tossing and turning right along with her. My growing belly is getting more and more unwieldy but I can only blame a piece of my discomfort on my pregnancy. The rest is due to fear.

Every time I try to sleep, Boris Sobakin pops back into my head. I picture his sinister leer, his beady eyes, the way he had

looked at me like I was a piece of meat at the market.

I'm on my usual hamster wheel of anxiousness when Polly groans in her sleep, her head lashing back and forth as though she's trying to keep something from touching her face.

"N-no... no... no..."

I don't wait for the nightmare to get worse; I sit up and shake her awake. "Hey, Polly, it's okay; you're safe. You're in the cabin with me, with your brothers and cousin..."

Nudging her gently, I keep talking until her eyes flicker open. There's a thin sheen of sweat along her brow and when she opens her eyes, I notice a tear crystalize at the tips of her eyelashes.

"A-another dream...?"

"Yeah, sweetheart, I'm afraid so." I reach over to my bedside table and pick up the glass of water I leave there every night. "Here," I say, handing it over to her. "Take a sip." She sits up and takes the glass from my hand, pale-faced and tired. "Was it a bad one?"

Polly shrugs. "They're all bad. This one felt more like a memory. I was in Agapov's basement, tied up. Except... Uri never comes for me."

Her lip trembles. In the darkness, wearing one of Uri's too-big shirts to sleep in and with her hair mussed in a frizzy halo around her head, I really see the fourteen all over her. She's so young. Way too young to have gone through something this monstrous. It's not fair.

I glance down at my charm bracelet, thinking about my Ziva, who barely got to live before she died. I guess life's not fair in general. I know that as well as anyone.

"It *is* over, though, isn't it?" Polly rasps suddenly.

I take the glass from her hand and set it back down. I have no desire to lie to her but in the current state she's in, I don't see how the truth will help. "Yes, honey," I say gently. "You're safe now."

“Then why are we still here?” she protests. “If there isn’t a threat to us anymore, we should be back home.”

I keep forgetting: Polly is not Lev. She can’t be mollified with half-assed explanations. She can’t be distracted by new toys or new video games.

“We will be soon,” I say. “It’s just that your brother wants to beef up security measures around the mansion before we move back there. Just so that you have complete peace of mind.”

Polly looks down at her hands. She’s bitten her nails clean off. A few have even started to bleed at the cuticles. “Peace of mind,” she scoffs. “I don’t know if I’ll ever have that again.”

I take up her hands in my own. “You will, Polly. You’re stronger than you know and so much more capable than you believe.”

She gives me a small, probably-fake smile. “Thanks for staying with me. I’m glad you’re here.”

I lightly rap the back of her knuckles and smile back. “Stop it or you’re gonna make me cry. Now, lie back down and close your eyes. I’m right here. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

I have no business making her promises like that, but sometimes, you just have to say the words and hope they’ll prove true. She does as I asked, curling up with the blankets raised to her chin and letting her face ease.

After a while, her breathing evens out into the rhythms of sleep.

I hope for her sake it’s a dreamless one.

ALYSSA

I've just snuck upstairs to get a few minutes to myself when the door opens and Uri walks in. I can't even bring myself to sit up, but that's fine, because he seems perfectly content to collapse into bed beside me.

"I was gonna come down in a bit," I protest meekly.

He rolls onto his side, head propped on his hand, and smirks. "You wanted some peace and quiet. You don't have to explain that to me."

Chewing my lip, I ask, "Do you think anyone will miss us if we just stay up here for the rest of the night?"

"I'm gonna do you one better," he replies. "But it does involve getting out of this bed."

"Rain check."

"Not an option, *narushitel*. Trust me: I'll make it worth your while." He pushes off the bed and I hear him walk towards the door. He doesn't leave, though. It sounds like he's picking something up and walking it back over to me. "This is for you."

I force myself upright and stare at the two boxes he's holding. "For me?"

"For you," he repeats. "Open the big box first."

I pull open the package to find a pretty summery dress nestled between layers of tissue paper. It's been so long since I dressed up. Hell, it's been a while since I even *wanted* to dress up.

“Are we going somewhere?” I ask hopefully.

“You’ll find out soon enough. Go and get changed. Once you’re ready, you can open the second package.”

“So bossy.”

“I don’t think that’s actually a complaint, is it?”

Grinning, he slaps my ass as I walk my dress into the bathroom, feeling an instant uptick in my mood. I shimmy out of my clothes and into the new garment. I swear there must be some kind of magic in the stitching, because as soon as it slides over my body, I’m transformed from a baby incubator into an actual person again.

I stare at my reflection and for the first time in a long time, I actually like what I see. My stomach is still visible, mostly from the side, but the swirling pattern of the dress does a good job of camouflaging my bump.

I brush out my hair and pull out my makeup kit. It’s as basic as it gets, holding only the essentials, but it’ll work for this occasion. I apply a little foundation, some eyeshadow and blush, and a little gloss over a thin layer of lipstick. I smile at myself in the mirror. Not bad for ten minutes of work.

Glowing with renewed confidence, I head back into the bedroom, where Uri is waiting by the bed with the second, smaller box in his hands.

When he hands it to me, I pull the lid off gingerly and peel apart the tissue paper. Staring down at the small silver bullet vibrator on the inside, I snort with laughter.

Uri chuckles, too. “For old time’s sake,” he explains with a wink. “Now, go back in there. You’re wearing that tonight, too.”

I don’t bother arguing. Excitement races up and down my spine as I retrace my steps back to the bathroom. I wonder if the experience is going to be different now that I’m pregnant. I expect it to be more uncomfortable, more invasive. But somehow, when I wriggle it into place, it has the opposite effect. I feel... uninhibited. It’s as though the vibrator has given me permission to be the girl I was *before* I got pregnant.

Walking still takes some getting used to, but I do a couple of laps in the bathroom before heading back out to Uri.

“Are we really leaving the cabin?” I ask excitedly.

“Someone’s impatient today.”

“Excited, actually,” I correct as we walk through the empty cabin. “Where is everyone?”

“Dimiv and Nikolai are with Lev in his room and Polly’s still locked up in hers. Don’t worry—Nikolai will hold down the fort here.”

I should be nervous but the thrill surging through me is drowning out everything else. The cool metal tease of the vibrator in my underwear doesn’t hurt, either. He takes my hand as we leave the cabin but, instead of walking me towards the trail that leads down to the security station where the vehicles are parked, he goes in the opposite direction.

The path is narrow and faint, but visible. We wind through trees and underneath a dense canopy before the foliage clears and we emerge on the edge of a huge lake I didn’t even know existed.

I’m so mesmerized by the waves lapping the shore and birds trawling for something to eat along the surface of the water that I don’t notice the picnic table waiting by the shoreline.

“Oh my God!” I gasp when I see it. I turn to Uri slowly. “You set this up?”

“I had some help. Nikolai and Dimiv brought the table. I did the cooking, though, so don’t listen if they try to take credit for that.”

Two giant cloches sit on either side of the picnic table, resting on top of a pretty lace tablecloth. Wildflower petals are strewn from end to end, glowing red and orange and yellow in the evening light.

I giggle deliriously. “This is amazing.”

“Hungry?”

I turn to Uri, my gaze trailing over his body. He's wearing dark linen pants and a shirt left slightly open at the chest. Enough to make me wish that the vibrator tucked between my thighs could be replaced with something else...

"Yes," I murmur, but I make sure he's very well aware that I'm not talking about food.

Uri laughs. "Is that right?"

But instead of reaching for me like I expect him to, he puts his hand into his pocket—and a second later, I gasp. The vibrator whirs to life and I pinch my legs together as those first ticklish tremors rip through me.

He kicks it up a notch and the vibrator feels like it's twisting slowly inside me. My eyes flutter, my knees buckle and I bite down on my bottom lip. Uri takes a step closer. His mere presence is enough to make me wet. Between him and the vibrator, I have no control anymore.

"Is this too much?" he asks.

I shake my head. "I-it's fine. I can... *mm*... take it."

Is there a way to look graceful while there's a vibrator creating havoc inside you? I'm not so sure. But I'm saved from the awkwardness of having to try when Uri leads me off to the side of the picnic bench, where there's a blanket spread out beneath one of the more willowy trees.

"Strip," he orders me in a voice that has my entire body heating up instantly.

I pull off my pretty new dress with a quick pang of regret and throw it off to the side. Then I discard my bra and panties. The vibrator circling inside me makes it hard to care about how I may look to him right now.

But if there was any doubt, his hungry eyes clear it right up. "*Fuck*," he growls. "You look gorgeous."

He helps lower me onto the blanket and spreads me out beneath him. Then he changes the settings on the vibrator until I'm writhing around uncontrollably, squirming underneath his

watchful gaze. How is it possible that he hasn't even touched me yet?

"Uri," I gasp. "Please..."

"Please what?"

I bite my lips. "I-I... need you to touch me..."

He gets down onto his knees with my legs wrapped around him and starts to stroke the lips of my pussy. I moan as he works with the vibrator. It's like he's trying to make me explode. Truth be told, I'm not mad about it.

My eyes close as the orgasm starts to hit. I reach up for him and land on an arm. Even his forearms feel hard and muscled. My nails dig into his skin as I come, crying out so loud that my voice echoes over the lake.

When I can breathe semi-normally again, he removes the vibrator from inside me and sets it off to the side. I can see my juices glistened on the silver-plated surface.

Chuckling darkly, he floats over me, his lips lingering over my breasts before he thrusts himself inside me. I'm so wet that it doesn't create even the slightest bit of pressure.

"More," I gasp. "Fuck me harder... yes, yes... *more*."

He does fuck me a little harder than usual but I can tell he's reining himself in all the same. There's that vein in his jaw twitching violently and his eyes are fixed on me with a thirsty kind of desperation.

I lift my hips to meet his and he groans, "Baby, we have to be careful..."

"I've *been* careful. For right now, I want to be reckless."

He bends down and starts lashing his tongue over my ear. I cry out as his thrusts intensify. *Yes. Yes. Yes.* I know I'm close now but I want to stretch this moment out, make it last just another minute more. Two minutes more.

But as the *thwack, thwack, thwack* of skin on skin gets louder and louder, I know there's no delaying the inevitable. I come

and, moments later, I feel the sweet warmth of his release on the heels of mine.

Uri rolls off me immediately but keeps his body close to mine, one arm curled over my chest. He kisses me until our breathing calms down.

“This idea right here... inspired. Chef’s kiss.”

He grins. “You deserved to be pampered for once. What with all the looking after you do for everyone else.”

“It’s not a chore for me.”

“Which only means you deserve this all the more.”

Uri sits up, leaning against the trunk of the tree and I tuck myself between his legs so that I can loll my head back against his chest and gaze out over the lake.

“It really is beautiful here,” I whisper with a contented sigh.

He nods in agreement. “See those rocks over there? We used to jump off them when we were younger. The lakebed dips down a little deeper, so it was perfect for diving.”

I smile thinking about younger versions of Uri, Nikolai, and Dimiv running around in their little swim trunks, trying to outdo one another.

“Sounds like you guys had a lot of fun here.”

“Hopefully, our children will, too.”

That’s all it takes for me to picture them. *Our children*. A little boy who looks like Uri. Perhaps a little girl who looks like me. Running around in their swimsuits just like their daddy did, their laughter lighting up the lake. In my head, Lev and Polly are there, too. The Lev I see is less nervous. The Polly I picture is less scared.

It could happen. It *will* happen.

I just have to believe.

ALYSSA

I don't even realize my leg is bouncing uncontrollably until Uri's hand lands on my knee.

"It's going to be okay," he says gently.

I can see why he would think that. I haven't exactly been forthcoming about the pain I've been experiencing lately. Although maybe *pain* is too strong a word. It's more like sharp bursts of discomfort that have me stressing out about the two babies in my belly.

The last time I felt that twinge was with Lev. He'd looked at me with wide eyes and asked if the babies were coming. "Not yet, buddy. It's too early."

"Really? Because you look really big."

Of course, he had then proceeded to list all the different things I resembled. A stuffed pepper. A cow. A light bulb.

Gee, just what every pregnant woman longs to hear. Truly the stuff dreams are made of.

I give Uri a tense smile and try to be grateful that we are out of the cabin, even if it's only for a doctor's appointment. Lev had to be distracted in his room while we snuck out, though. He wouldn't have dealt well with being left behind. Polly emerged from her quarters just long enough to see us off. I would have invited her along if I thought that it might pull her out of the darkness she can't seem to shake. But she disappeared back upstairs before I could even ask.

“I’m just nervous, is all,” I tell Uri now. “I’m sure everything is fine.”

Correction: I *hope* everything is fine. There’s a very big difference between the two sentiments. Uri seems to know exactly what I’m feeling, because he wraps an arm around my shoulders and pulls me closer against him.

“You’re strong. Our babies will be strong, too.”

“What’s taking Dr. Grigory so long?” I ask impatiently.

Uri’s eyebrows knit together with irritation. “Good question. Let me go and—”

Before he can finish his sentence, the door opens and the doctor walks in. “So sorry I’m late. There was traffic on the highway.”

Uri’s face twitches and he growls low in his chest. “We don’t have much time. Let’s get things started.”

“Of course,” Dr. Grigory agrees, moving towards me and tugging on a pair of rubber gloves.

I sit and do my best not to squirm while the doctor examines me thoroughly. Uri stands at my shoulder the entire time, a literal shadow hanging over me. Except that this shadow makes me feel calm and safe. Like everything will be okay.

At least, that’s how I feel—right up until Dr. Grigory squints at the monitor for a prolonged minute and frowns.

“Doctor?” I ask tentatively. He doesn’t look at me right away and when he does, he doesn’t quite meet my eyes. “What’s wrong?”

He clears his throat. “It seems that one baby is developing a little slower than the other.”

Immediately, my eyes flit to Uri. He’s staring at the monitor as though he has the power to change it with just one look.

“W-what does that mean?” I ask desperately.

Dr. Grigory gives me a smile that I’m sure he means to be reassuring. “It can sometimes happen in multiple pregnancies. When fetuses share the same placenta, the stronger fetus

sometimes starts consuming more nutrients than the other. It's called TTTS. Twin to Twin Transfusion Syndrome."

"With all due respect, I don't care what it's called. I just want to know how to make it stop."

Dr. Grigory nods. "I understand. For the moment, there's nothing to be done. We need to monitor the situation and see how your pregnancy progresses. Then—"

"Excuse me?" Uri's voice is whip-sharp and borderline violent. Dr. Grigory gulps and turns a shade whiter than he was a second ago. "Your approach to the fact that one baby isn't getting enough energy or nutrients to survive is, *We'll wait and see?*"

"Uri, the situation is not as serious as all that." Dr. Grigory gives me a helpless glance before he swallows again. "If it gets any worse, then we can take action—"

"Why not take action now?"

"Because there are no signs of fetal distress yet. But I will keep a close eye on Alyssa over the coming weeks. If it's clear that one twin is regressing further, then we can talk about options."

"Which are what, exactly?" I chime in.

Dr. Grigory glances between us warily. "Well, the most efficient way of dealing with TTTS is FLP. That would be a form of laser fetal surgery. It involves the insertion of a laparoscope into your uterus. It's a minimally invasive procedure. However, it is still surgery, so of course, there are risks involved."

"Then *eliminate* the risks," Uri snarls.

The doctor's eyes go wide. "I... Mr. Bugrov, the thing is—"

Uri scowls in disgust and turns away. "Doctors really don't know shit, do they?"

I grab his hand and give the doctor a bracing smile. "We're just worried. Can you please give us a moment?"

“Of course,” he says quickly. He looks relieved to be scurrying out of the room.

The moment the door swings shut behind him, I turn to Uri. “You really think pissing off the man who might have to perform surgery on me is a good idea?”

His jaw is clenched so tight I’m scared he might pop a blood vessel. “We can get a second opinion. Emily, perhaps.”

I squeeze his arm. “We’re getting ahead of ourselves. Dr. Grigory knows what he’s doing. If you stop scaring him and just let him do his job, he might be able to do it better.” Uri sneers, so I add, “You heard him. There’s nothing to worry about right now. We’re talking in hypotheticals here.”

“It feels irresponsible to do nothing.”

“I want to avoid surgery as long as I can, Uri,” I tell him gently. “Our best bet is taking it easy. Hopefully, if I get enough rest, this will just correct itself.”

“Problems don’t just correct themselves.”

I shrug. “That approach worked for you last time someone tried trespassing on your property to steal some mail.”

His eyebrows flatline, but I spy the corners of his mouth twitching with the faint hint of a smile. That’s progress, at least.

“I need you to be positive, okay?” I add. “I’m not sure I have the energy to be optimistic for the both of us.”

He sighs. “Fine.”

“Thank you. Now, call the doctor back in here and let’s finish up this appointment.”

Uri sticks his head into the hall and summons the doctor again. Dr. Grigory walks back in with a nervous frown on his face. He shows us the baby monitor and points out his observations. Even to my untrained eye, it’s obvious that one twin looks noticeably bigger than the other. Despite what I just told Uri, I *am* worried.

“You’re really going to have to put your feet up and relax, Alyssa. You need to be someplace calm, quiet, and peaceful. The Bugrov estate is nice but perhaps a change of scenery might also help soothe your mind and relax your body.”

“We’re not at the estate anymore,” Uri says gruffly.

“Oh,” Grigory says with a nod. “Right. Excuse me for prying.” He looks back at the monitor. “Would you like to know the sex of your babies?”

Uri glances at me, his hand landing on the small of my back. “It’s up to you.”

My initial instinct is *yes*. My second thought is *hell no*. I’d never admit this out loud, not even to Uri—but I don’t want to know the sex of the babies in case we end up losing one. It’ll be so much harder once I know what we’re having.

I swallow my worry and shake my head. “I’d like it to be a surprise. We’ll wait to find out.”

“As you wish.”

Once the gel has been wiped off my body, Uri helps me off the examination table. He takes my hand as we walk out of the hospital, but I can tell from that far-off look in his eyes that he’s in plan-and-prep mode. The man has never met a backup plan he didn’t want to prepare a backup plan for.

The whole drive back to the cabin, I try not to let my fear get the best of me. But just like before the appointment, I have to consciously focus to stop my knee from bouncing. It helps that Uri takes my hand and keeps it in his lap until we arrive.

When we do, I’m exhausted. I can tell Uri is, too, though he does a much better job of hiding it than me.

“It’s going to be okay, Alyssa,” he tells me softly. “Both our babies are going to be okay.” He gives my hand a squeeze. “I’m not going to let anything happen to them. Just like I’m not going to let anything happen to you.”

URI

“What’s the word on Sobakin’s woman and boy?”

Nikolai barely even glances at me as he gets into the passenger seat. “Dimiv said he’s got a man on the job. But both Elena and Artem have heavy security surrounding them at all times.”

“Of course they do. Doesn’t mean security can’t be breached.”

“We don’t have the same manpower in Moscow that we do here, Uri.”

Gritting my teeth, I rev the engine and leave the cabin behind. It’s been days and we’ve heard nothing about Boris. He hasn’t resurfaced yet and I’m getting tired of waiting. Hence the spontaneous scope-out.

Dimiv is currently in charge back at the safehouse. He’s been roped into a video game marathon with Lev while Alyssa stays in bed with Polly for company. She’s been quieter than usual after our doctor’s appointment and I’m hoping that some closure will help her relax a little.

Closure in the form of Boris’s head on a spike would be most preferable.

“Are you sure you want to try this location?” Nikolai asks. “Boris and his men haven’t worked out of there in years.”

“Which is exactly why he might risk it. He’ll assume it’s under the radar. There aren’t very many places he can hide.”

“On the contrary, this is a big city in an even bigger country. Big fuckin’ planet, too, while we’re on the topic. For all we

know, he could be guzzling vodka in some random pub in Russia by now.”

I glare at him. “Aren’t you just a fount of optimism today?”

Nikolai rolls his eyes. “I’m just being realistic, man. If I were that fucker, I’d have cut and run the moment I was free.”

“Which only proves that you don’t have the personality to be *pahkan*.”

Nikolai flinches, his face hardening instantly. It’s a low blow and I regret it immediately. Just not enough to take it back.

I haven’t lived with my brother for a very long time and the close quarters that the cabin requires haven’t exactly been conducive to our relationship. Nikolai and I always get along better with some space between us. Living on top of one another this last week has reminded me of why he moved out the first chance he got.

It doesn’t help that Alyssa loves the hell out of him.

“It looks abandoned,” Nikolai remarks gruffly as we pull up outside of the old Sobakin haunt.

“Doesn’t mean it is.”

He sighs. “How long are we gonna sit and brood before you accept that no one’s here?”

“We just arrived.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

I bite my tongue to stop another below-the-belt insult from flying loose. “An hour or so.”

He mutters something I don’t catch and sinks low in his seat, a hood pulled down over his face. “Whatever you say.”

I grab my phone, if only to distract myself from the tension boiling between us right now, and start texting Alyssa.

URI: *How’s it going?*

ALYSSA: *Polly went back to her room for a nap. I’m just lying in bed... thinking of you.*

Hm. I like where this is going.

URI: *Oh yeah? What are you thinking about?*

ALYSSA: *The lake.*

That's all she needs to say for me to know exactly what she's thinking of. I can feel the heat spread slowly to my extremities. I adjust in my seat so that Nikolai doesn't suspect what's unfolding right next to him.

ALYSSA: *I've got your little silver present in bed with me right now.*

URI: *What a good girl you are. I might have to reward you.*

ALYSSA: *Please.*

URI: *Take off all your clothes. I want you completely naked and splayed out on that bed.*

ALYSSA: *Done.*

That didn't take long at all. Someone's clearly eager. It makes me regret this little stakeout, the unfortunate distance between us. I could have been at home, ravishing her body, making her come again and again with my own two hands, instead of letting the metal toy I bought her have all the fun.

Before I can think of an answer, she sends another message. This one is a picture, though. I lean away from Nikolai, making sure to angle my phone to the side so that he can't see my screen.

It takes everything in me not to groan out loud. The woman is a fucking vision. Her breasts are on full display, tempting me with soft, supple curves. Her nipples are aroused and begging for attention. I'm straining so hard in my pants that it's painful.

She sends another picture—this one with the toy clasped between her slim fingers.

URI: *That's my good little kiska. Now, slide that inside you slowly.*

I open the app on my phone and find the control panel. Cranking it on, I start the vibrator on low. If I'm going to be here for an hour, I intend to make it count.

ALYSSA: *Oh God... it feels so good, Uri.*

URI: *I want you to touch yourself while the vibrator works its magic. Imagine I'm with you, sliding my hands over your breasts. Sucking on one nipple, then the other...*

ALYSSA: *It feels so good...*

I kick the vibrator up a couple of notches and I can almost hear the little gasp that undoubtedly shoots out of her mouth.

ALYSSA: *Uri...*

Uri: *You like that, baby?*

ALYSSA: *I love it.*

URI: *I'm sucking on your tits, circling your clit with my cock.*

ALYSSA: *Yes, fuck me. That's what I want. I want to suck on you. I want to choke on it. I want to take you in so deep that I'm gagging.*

URI: *What a naughty little narushitel you are.*

ALYSSA: *I'm your naughty little narushitel. All yours.*

I turn the vibrator up all the way, wishing that I could see her writhing around on our bed, her body blossoming like a flower ready to be plucked.

ALYSSA: *h8n\$kw\$\$%55@#\$\$\$fhdb!!fwh093b*

I let out a satisfied chuckle. That message says it all. I imagine her piqued moans, her shuddering gasps. Her body rolling with the orgasm I've just given her from miles away.

ALYSSA: *Shit. Sorry. That last message... I came *blushing face emoji**

URI: *Consider that round one. I'm just warming you up for later.*

ALYSSA: *That a promise?*

ALYSSA: **Smiling face emoji**Heart eyes emoji**

“For fuck’s sake,” Nikolai snaps suddenly. “What’s the point in the stakeout if you’re going to spend all your time looking down at your phone?”

“What the fuck is your problem?”

He opens his mouth to snap back, but before he can, my phone starts vibrating in my hand.

“Cousin,” Dimiv’s voice comes through from the other side when I answer. “I’ve got some news from the guy I’ve got trailing Elena Chernoff and her boy. You’re... not gonna like it, I’m afraid.”

I sit up straighter. “What is it?”

“Their trail went cold about an hour ago.”

That’s not the only thing going cold right now. “What do you mean?”

“He followed them into a shopping mall. They shopped around for a bit and then they went into the food court. That’s where he lost sight of them.”

“Their security?”

“Left the mall without them. Which means—”

“Sobakin had them extracted,” I growl, resisting the urge to fling my phone out the window. “*Fuck!*”

“He’s planning something, Uri.”

“No shit. And now, he’s got the woman and the boy under his protection so he can move on me and my family without reservations. *Blyat*’. That boy was our leverage!”

“We’ll find another way to get to him.”

When I hang up, I can feel Nikolai’s eyes boring a hole in the side of my face. “What?” I snap.

“You can’t afford to be this distracted.”

I glare at him. “I’m not.”

Nikolai’s lips purse up as he turns his gaze away from me. Hard as it is for me to admit it, even to myself, he’s right: I can’t get distracted anymore.

It’s time to get my head in the game.

It's time to find that motherfucker and end him once and for all.

ALYSSA

I inch my way towards the porch, where Uri is standing with his back to me. “I want every security measure we have fortified. And I want another sweep of the property...” He runs a hand through his hair. “... I know and I don’t care. Just *do it.*”

He hangs up and puts his phone away. “Fuck,” he mutters under his breath, still unaware that I’m watching him. I move in a little closer, waiting for him to notice me like he always does because the man has the peripheral vision and spatial awareness of a damn ninja.

But... still nothing.

Could this really be my time to catch him by surprise?
Wonders never cease.

He’s got both hands resting on the porch railing, gazing out at the forest beyond. Closer... closer... I jump forward and wrap my arms around him.

“Gotcha!”

His fist is clenched and up and halfway towards punching a crater into the side of my head before he realizes who is giving him the anaconda treatment around the midsection. “*Blyat*,” he grumbles. “Don’t do that.”

“I can’t believe I actually got you,” I say in amazement. “Does this mean I’m the *pakhan* now?”

He glares down at me as the hand that was just one second ago on a collision course with my face comes to settle protectively

around my shoulders instead. “You are supposed to be in bed.”

“I’ve been in bed all morning. I needed to stretch my legs.”

“Stretch them around your room. You shouldn’t be walking up and down those stairs too often.”

I roll my eyes. “Methinks you might be taking the doctor’s advice a little too seriously.”

“Whereas you aren’t taking his advice at all.”

I wrap my arms around his torso. “I’ve been a freaking girl scout all this time. Model patient. But it’s boring up in my room, Uri. There’s only so many books a girl can read. Only so many movies a girl can watch. Only so many naps a girl can take.”

“The day you reach your napping limit will be a worrying day for all of us.” He glances past me towards the open door that leads to the kitchen. “But if you want me to come tuck you in myself, all you have to do is ask.”

My throat is suddenly dry. It’s really, truly unfair how he can do that. One murmured suggestion about anything even remotely bedroom-related and *boom*, I’m putty in his hands.

“Is that a threat or a promise?” I tease back, biting my lower lip.

“Careful, *narushitel*—you keep looking at me like that and we won’t even make it to bed. I might just have to spread you out on the kitchen table.”

“Ew, please don’t.” I whirl around to see Polly coming down the steps, wincing uncomfortably at what she just overheard. “We *eat* on that table.”

“Pol!” Uri says in surprise. “You’re looking... better.”

“Less corpse, do you mean?”

I can’t help but laugh. The fact that she’s cracking jokes is a good sign, in my not-so-professional opinion. And the truth is, she does look less corpse. There’s more of a light flush on her cheeks, more of a spark in her eyes.

“Slightly,” agrees Uri. “But I’d prefer you stay in bed until the corpseyness has reached zero.”

Polly wrinkles up her nose in a scowl. “I’m gonna go stark raving mad if I stay in there. A girl can only have—”

“Yes, yes, I heard the whole speech already,” Uri snaps irritably. He softens and says, “Fine, you can stay down here for a little while. Go hang out with Nikolai or Lev. But *you*—” He turns those scintillating baby blues on me. “—get your ass back upstairs and *rest*.”

“Come on, Lys,” Polly says to me with a conspiratorial wink as she comes and scoops my elbow in hers. “Let’s do as we’re told. Otherwise, your baby daddy might actually blow a fuse. That vein in his jaw is never a good thing.”

I have to suppress laughter as I throw Uri a wink and follow Polly upstairs. “I expect you back in our room in twenty minutes,” he yells out after us.

When we get to Polly’s room, I make myself comfortable on the window seat while she sprawls out on the floor with a huge stretch and yawn. “Sorry about Uri,” I say. “He’s been a little tightly wound since our last doctor’s appointment.”

“I can’t say I blame him. You really are a menace to your own health. He doesn’t even know you’ve been cleaning Lev’s room and fetching me snacks from the kitchen, does he?”

My eyes go wide. “You aren’t gonna tell him, are you?”

“Don’t worry. Your dirty little secret is safe with me.” She holds up a finger in warning. “But if you don’t start taking it easy, I may have to rat you out.”

I frown and flop back against the wall behind me. “You’re as bad as your brother.”

She smiles sympathetically. “I get where he’s coming from. And I’m inclined to agree. You need to put your feet up and let yourself be pampered.”

“Blech. I’d rather be waterboarded.”

Polly laughs. “I know you’re worried about me, Alyssa. But don’t be. I’m okay.” I raise my eyebrows and she nods

emphatically. “Seriously. I’ve been doing better lately. I’m not gonna lie: some days are harder than others. But today’s a good one. I feel... optimistic.” Her eyes land on my belly. “Mostly because I’m gonna be an aunt in a few months and I can’t wait. But in order for me to be an aunt, you need to give birth to two healthy babies. So...”

“I know, I know. Bed rest,” I mutter. “You really are as bad as your brother.”

She laughs. “And I don’t want him blaming me. So off you go.”

“You’re kicking me out of your room?”

“Just for the time being. We both know he’s in your bedroom right now, counting down the twenty-minute deadline he gave you one second at a time.”

“I’m surrounded by a bunch of neurotic crazies.”

Polly laughs. “Can’t argue with you there.”

I drop a kiss on her forehead and head down the hall to my bedroom. Sure enough, she was right. I walk in to find Uri standing by the window, waiting for me.

“Three minutes to spare,” he growls, glancing at his watch. “Not bad.”

I roll my eyes. “Polly forced me out of her room, thanks to you.”

“Smart girl.”

I pull off the wraparound dress I’m wearing and crawl under the covers, burrowing into my nest of soft sheets and blankets. When I glance up out of my cloud, he’s watching me with a strange look in his eye. “Want to join me in here?”

He pulls off his shirt and slips under the covers with me. I slide my hands over his rock-solid arms and abs while his hand lands on my belly.

“You know something I was thinking... you’re going to be a great mother,” he says gently.

“Thanks,” I say with a blush. “What makes you think so?”

“The way you look out for the two kids—Polly and Lev. You’re a mother already, whether you know it or not.”

I exhale slowly. “I always wanted to be a mother,” I admit. “I just didn’t think it would happen so early.”

“You regret it?”

I glance at him in surprise. “No,” I assure him emphatically. “Not at all. I just... I was scared when I realized I might be...”

“Scared?”

I nod. “I lost the one person I thought I couldn’t live without. I couldn’t imagine losing anyone else that I cared about that deeply.”

“You’re not going to lose anyone,” he growls ferociously.

I slide under his arm, drinking in that woodsy musk that clings to his skin. “Just so you know, I’m gonna be one of those unbearably overprotective helicopter moms.”

He chuckles. “Just so you know, I might not be much better.”

“So our kids are gonna need therapists young—is that what we’re saying?”

“Our kids will have us,” he says firmly. “That’s all they’ll need.” He kisses the top of my head. “As long as their mother remembers to sit still long enough to pop them out.”

“We’re back to this again?”

“Bed rest doesn’t have to be boring, you know. There are plenty of things we could do to pass the time.”

“Oh, yeah? Like what?”

He raises his eyebrows as his hand slides over my belly. His fingers land between my legs, stroking at the thin fabric of my panties. “Like this, for example.”

I let out a long, drawn-out moan as my legs part instinctively for him. “I’m not sure this is what the doctor had in mind when he told me to spend more time in bed.”

Uri gives me a smug smile. “Doctors don’t know everything.”

My toes curl as he slips his fingers underneath my panties and starts grazing them over my moistening lips. “*Mmm*, Uri...”

“Relax, my little *kiska*. This is the part where you let go of all your stress and let me take care of you.”

Well, when you put it like that...

I guess I’m okay with staying in bed a little while longer.

URI

I wake up spooning Alyssa, my arm draped over her hip as she breathes gently. I lie there with her for as long as my conscience allows. If it were solely up to me, I'd stay here indefinitely, living and basking in the perfect silence of the moment.

But my head activates almost immediately. Has Stepan completed the third sweep of the estate that I'd asked for yesterday? Were all the extra security measures around the property implemented? Where the hell is Boris and what is he planning?

My children will be born in just a few short months and I need for this to be over before then. I don't want them born into a world on the brink of burning.

So with a sigh, I extricate myself from Alyssa and roll to the side. When I reach for my phone, I see I have three missed calls from Kruger.

Heart in my throat, I pull my boxer briefs on and slip out of the room, ignoring the chill in the air. The cabin is flush with quiet. Everyone's in their own rooms, taking advantage of the lazy morning.

I call Kruger back and walk towards the gigantic window at the end of the carpeted hallway. "What's going on? You have an update for me?"

"Ever heard of Artur Agapov?"

I frown. "No. But I'm guessing he's related to Oleg. His son?"

“Younger brother. And according to all my sources, this guy is unpredictable and reckless.”

“Let me guess: he’s gearing up to take revenge on me for offing his brother?”

“That’s what I’m hearing. And he’s not doing it alone.”

“Sobakin,” I growl.

“None other. I caught a whiff of his name earlier when I was scoping out a couple of Agapov’s men. It seems that the two are joining forces.”

My jaw clenches tightly. “Then we’ve got to prepare. I need you to stick to Agapov’s men as closely as you can. Pass any information you get from them directly to me.”

“Got it, boss.”

The moment he hangs up, I call up Stepan. His voice is groggy with sleep when he answers. “Sir?”

“Stepan, get everything ready. We’re coming home today.”

“Consider it done, sir.”

I hang up and turn around to find Alyssa, standing in our doorway, a thin bedsheet wrapped around her body. Her hair falls carelessly over her shoulders but her forehead is creased with worry.

“Everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine.” I walk over and brush the bangs from her forehead. “Go back to bed.”

“Only if you come with me.”

I kiss her forehead. “I wish I could. I have to prepare a couple of things.”

She chews at the inside of her cheek. “So we’re leaving today, huh? Back to the mansion?”

I nod. “It’s the best place to protect you all. I’ve had my men run dozens of sweeps of the place. Any weakness in the estate’s perimeter has been fortified. There’s no way in or out unless I say so.”

“Does that mean you figured out where Sobakin is?”

I don't want to get into this conversation with her, but she's got that look on her face. Her eyebrows are arched, her lips are pursed, and her cheeks have lost their color. That expression usually means that she's not going to back down easily.

“Alyssa—”

“Don't you dare tell me that none of this is my concern. It *is* my concern. This is my family, too.”

With a sigh, I reach out to stroke the curve of her neck. Her skin is warm and soft beneath my fingertips. “I don't know where Sobakin is, but I have an idea what he might be planning. And that means we need to prepare ourselves for a fight.”

Her jaw squares as she nods. “I'll go get packing.”

She walks with her shoulders pushed back and chin high, as though she's prepared to enter the fight herself. It chills me to my core. But it also leaves me feeling fulfilled, amazed. Grateful.

Somehow, over the last few months, the thief on the fence has proved that she's made of more than I ever would've guessed.

She's made of steel, too.



Lev is the happiest to return back to the estate. He's ensconced himself in the basement from the second we cross the threshold, and I'm not mad about it. The lower levels are basically a bunker and if he's holed up down there, he's safe.

Alyssa is sleeping with Polly tonight. The change of environment has thrown my sister for a loop that none of us were expecting. But like always, Alyssa knew exactly how to calm her down—movie marathon, junk food, and a two-person sleepover that left my bed empty.

Tonight, I don't mind.

I slip downstairs to the porch next to the pool where Dimiv and Nikolai are sitting, smoking cigars and drinking scotch.

"I'm beginning to think you two sleep out here," I remark as I take a seat next to them.

"There are worse places to be, cousin," Dimiv says with a cackle. "The night is warm, the vodka is strong, and our enemies are foolish enough to think they can get the best of us. It is a good day to have Bugrov blood in your veins."

Dimiv hands me a cigar and I light it as I recline. Nikolai pours me a glass of scotch and slides the glass over to me. "Give us the word, Uri," is all he says.

I let out a plume of smoke. "We need to strike first." Dimiv and Nikolai exchange a look that I ignore. "The waiting game has run its course. I don't want to give him the benefit of making the first move."

"I'm inclined to agree," Dimiv says. "We can't underestimate the power of surprise."

"You know what might help with that?" Nikolai suggests. "Manpower."

"We have men," I point out.

Nikolai nods. "But do we have *enough* men? What if we were to attack with a stronger force?"

"Are you talking about mercenaries?"

He shakes his head. "I'm talking allies. Why not take a page from Sobakin's book and join forces against a common enemy?"

Dimiv frowns. "Who're you talking about?"

"Dominik Evanoff," I answer immediately before Nikolai has to.

"Exactly," Nikolai croons, leaning in. "Why not? We've already learned that Evanoff has bad blood with Sobakin. The only reason Evanoff hasn't moved against Sobakin yet is because he didn't think he could win. With us, he stands a chance."

I consider it for a few moments. “It’s not a bad plan.”

Nikolai smirks. “That’s Uri speak for ‘*I wish I’d thought of it.*’”

ALYSSA

“Your vitals are good,” Dr. Grigory concludes with a satisfied nod.

I breathe a sigh of relief. But Uri doesn't look like he's ready to celebrate just yet. “And the babies? How are they doing?”

“I'm checking on them now.” He turns the sonogram machine on, squirts some ultrasound gel onto my stomach, and spreads it around with his paddle. “Hmm.”

“‘Hmm’?” I repeat, switching into my default setting, which, these days, is always panic. “What does ‘hmm’ mean? ‘Hmm’ doesn't sound good. I don't like ‘Hmm.’”

Dr. Grigory turns to me with placid eyes. “I'm still concerned with one baby's growth. It's a little slow. Certainly behind for a fetus at twenty-seven weeks.”

I glance at Uri helplessly. “So, um, what should we be doing to improve the baby's growth? Is there an injection I can take? Pills I can use? Specific foods I should be eating?”

I'm aware that I'm talking a mile a minute but that's only because I'm *thinking* a mile a minute. If I stop, I might just break down.

Thankfully, Uri's hand lands on my shoulder and the weight of him, the pressure of his fingers, forces me to take a deep breath and concentrate on what the doctor is trying to explain to both of us.

“For now, I suggest that you admit yourself into this ward so that I can keep a close eye on you and the babies, monitor their

progress in the next few weeks.”

My jaw drops. “*Admit myself?*”

“That’s not happening,” Uri says firmly. “I’m taking her back home after this appointment.”

Dr. Grigory looks uncomfortable as he gets to his feet. “Sir, Mr. Bugrov... With the way this pregnancy is going, it looks like the last trimester is going to be the hardest for Alyssa. She’s going to be lucky if she gets to carry these babies to term.”

Fear pumps through my heart. I jump in before Uri can say another word. “What do you mean by that? There’s a question of me *not* carrying these babies to term?”

His eyebrows lower and his face wrinkles with frown lines. “I don’t mean to alarm you, but it’s important that you know exactly what’s happening.”

I grip Uri’s hand tightly. He’s staring daggers at the doctor as though Grigory is personally responsible for my high-risk pregnancy. But I can’t worry about his reaction right now. Not when I’m trying desperately to contain my own. “I want to know exactly what’s happening.”

Dr. Grigory gives me a sympathetic smile. “At the rate your pregnancy is progressing, I’ll be happy if you make it to thirty weeks.”

My eyes feel like they’re about to pop out of my head. “I’m sorry... Did you say *thirty* weeks? That’s only three weeks away!”

“Correct.”

“Doctor, t-that can’t be right. I’ll only be seven months or so... my babies will be born more than two months premature.”

“Yes, but we have the facilities here to make sure that those babies survive a premature delivery. If, however, you were to go to your home, I’m not sure we’d get the babies back to the hospital fast enough to save them.”

I look up at Uri in mute horror. He squeezes my hand but his eyes are trained on Dr. Grigory. “How serious is this?”

“More serious than I would’ve liked,” the doctor admits with a sigh. “She’s going to need complete bed rest from now on and constant monitoring. The best place for her is right here.”

Uri’s jaw clenches hard. “Can the less-developed baby survive a premature delivery?”

Dr. Grigory really needs to work on his poker face, because the little cringe he gives Uri by way of an answer feels completely unprofessional and way too close to hopeless for my liking. “We’re going to do everything in our power to make sure they both survive.”

I fight back tears. “That wasn’t a yes.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t make any promises. All I can do is give you the best possible medical advice I can to ensure that both your babies are born healthy. And that includes admitting yourself today.”

I have whiplash from the abrupt turn this appointment has taken. Gulping, I whisper, “Uri, if this is what’s best for them...”

He closes his eyes and breathes. After a moment, the angry downward V of intensity etched into his forehead eases and disappears. “Of course. We’ll admit you. If that’s what the doctor thinks is best.”

I give him a shaky smile. “Thank you.”

He turns back to Grigory. “She is going to have twenty-four hour security.”

“The hospital is equipped with security staff, Uri.”

“I want *my* men on duty. They’re the only ones I can trust right now. Now. if you can give us a few minutes...”

The doctor bows out immediately and Uri turns his focus on me. “I know you’re worried, but it’s going to be okay.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because you’re a great mother already. And you’re going to keep those babies safe inside you for as long as you can.”

“What if I can’t?”

“Then Grigory will save them for us. Whatever happens, we’re leaving this hospital with two children.”

He’s so confident that it’s hard not to believe him. He just has the kind of presence, the kind of power that makes me believe he can move mountains. I grip his arms tightly, hoping that some of that confidence will rub off on me. “Uri... I’m scared.”

“I know,” he says gently. “But you can do this.”

I can do this. I can do this. I can—

My silent meditation is interrupted by Uri’s phone blowing up. He looks down at his lock screen and winces. Disappointment unfurls in my belly but I pretend that I’m alright.

“It’s okay,” I tell him before he says anything. “You can leave if you have to.”

His hand lingers on mine. “Nikolai’s just outside. He’ll stay with you while I’m gone, okay?”

I nod. “I’ll be safe.”

He presses a kiss to my forehead and strides out of the room. A few seconds later, Nikolai walks in. “Hey there. Heard you’ve checked into Chez Hospital for the next couple of weeks.”

I sigh. “Looks like it.”

“They’re getting a private room prepped for you in this ward. It should be ready in a couple of minutes.”

I get off the examination table and join him on the chairs in the corner of the room. “Thanks for staying with me.” He doesn’t answer. Instead, he stares at my face like there’s some puzzle hidden there. “What?”

“What’s wrong with you?”

“Didn’t you hear? I’m gonna be lucky to carry these babies to thirty weeks. And even if I do, they’ll still be premature and they’ll still need to be moved to the NICU until they can function on their own.”

Nikolai puts his hand on mine. “These babies are half you and half Bugrov,” he points out. “They can handle anything life throws at them. Even in utero.”

“You’re confident?”

“What’s the alternative—giving up?” he scoffs. “That’s not an option.”

I smile and sink back on the exam table. “I just... I can’t go through this again, Nikolai. When I lost my sister, I thought I’d used up my quota of pain. I can’t bear the thought of losing either one of these babies.”

“There’s no stopping the inevitable, Alyssa. All this stress doesn’t change the universe.”

“I can’t turn my brain off, and...” I glance at Nikolai out of the corner of my eye. “The truth is, I can’t really talk to Uri about any of this.”

“Why not?”

“Because every time I try, it’s like he’s not really listening. He throws tools at me. He wants me to do this and do that. If I say I’m scared, he wants to bulk up security. If I tell him I feel bad, he tries to get me medicine. If I tell him I’m depressed, he buys me presents. But I don’t need any of that stuff. I just need him to *hear* me.”

Nikolai sighs. “You have to understand, Alyssa: Uri is the fix-it guy. He can’t meet a problem without trying to solve it. The idea of just listening without taking any action is not in his DNA. He’s used to having control and this situation is not in his control. So he tries to compensate by doing stuff for you whenever he can. It makes it easier to ignore his own doubts, his own worries.”

Nikolai has a point. Of course this is just as hard for Uri as it is for me. But at least I have the luxury of falling apart when I need to.

He doesn’t.

Perhaps I should take my own advice and try to listen to Uri a little better. I’ve gotten so used to having him take care of my

needs, that somewhere along the way, I'd forgotten he has his own.

“Thanks for talking to me, Nikolai. It's like having a therapist and a friend all rolled into one. Except cheaper.”

Nikolai just gives me a reassuring smile. “Anytime,” he says softly. “Anytime.”

URI

I don't trust anyone.

But sometimes, the appearance of trust goes a long way. Which is why I walk into the lobby of the Barrington Hotel unarmed and unaccompanied. Dimiv is sitting out in the foyer, sipping a vodka sour. But apart from him, I'm flying solo.

So, it appears, is Dominik Evanoff. The man is sallow-skinned and bone-thin, which makes him look like a weathered skeleton in an Armani suit. His blonde hair is slicked back with enough product to drown a horse in and he doesn't even attempt to smile when I approach his table.

He does stand up and offer me his hand. "Mr. Bugrov."

"Evanoff," I nod, taking the seat opposite him. "It's a pleasure to—"

"Dispense with the pleasantries, if you would, please. I've been in this game long enough to know that you don't make friends in our line of work. You make allies or enemies. That's it."

I rub my chin. No small talk is fine by me. "Well, then let me cut to the chase. I would like us to be allies, Dominik."

"I'm under no illusions as to who and what I am, Mr. Bugrov," he says in that flat, emotionless drawl of his. "My Bratva is far from matching yours in scope and strength. Why would you want to be my ally?"

"Simple. Because you and I share a common enemy. And I've always believed that the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

He nods grimly. “My father believed the same thing.”

“This is the same father that Boris Sobakin murdered in cold blood?”

His lips curl into a grimace and his eyes turn cold. “So this *is* about Boris Sobakin?” Steepling his fingers, he leans forward. “Then I’m interested in hearing what you have to say.”

I can tell from the zeal in his eyes that I’ve hooked the fish. Now, it’s just down to reeling him in. Usually, this would have been the easy part, but I can tell that I’m dealing with a different kind of specimen here.

Dominik Evanoff is all business. He might nurse personal grudges and harbor secret vendettas, but I doubt he’d jeopardize his own safety and the safety of his Bratva in order to act on them. I have to make this worth his while.

“I’m saying we join forces and take down the bastard once and for all. He hurt your family deeply. Now, he’s trying to do the same to mine. I say we *stop* him. I say we end him. We bury him like he buried your father. Like he buried mine.”

Dominik’s eyebrow ticks up a notch. “He killed your father, too?”

“I couldn’t prove it until recently. He staged quite the spectacle just so that the accident that took out my parents couldn’t be traced back to him. But you can’t hide these things forever. Someone always talks.”

“Someone always talks,” Dominik agrees. He takes a sip of his drink. Bourbon, from the smell of it. “Killing Boris Sobakin has been on my to-do list since I was a very young man.”

“Now, you have the chance to cross it off.”

He cocks his head to the side. “It is tempting. *Very* tempting. But I don’t need to remind you, Mr. Bugrov—”

“Uri. Please.”

He nods. “Uri. I don’t need to remind you that I am the *pahkan* of a comparatively small Bratva. I don’t have the kind of influence, resources, or manpower that you have.”

“No. But you can add to my strength. One thing’s for sure: Boris won’t be expecting you.”

Dominik’s lips curl into a smile. I can tell why he doesn’t do it very often: it’s nauseating and unpleasant. “No, he will not.”

“Finally, you and I would both have revenge for what he did to our families.”

Dominik nods. “And I want to jump on board...”

“But?”

The gleam in his eyes recedes back into disengaged deadpan. “But what’s in it for me?”

I raise my eyebrows. “Other than revenge?”

“Yes,” he says unapologetically. “No matter which way you slice it, there will be losses. If you’ve come to me, it means that Boris has joined forces with someone else. Am I right?”

“Artur Agapov.”

“Agapov?” Dominik scoffs. “He’s a rabid dog without a master to call him to heel.” He taps the edge of his glass. “But it proves my point. I need to come out of this battle with more than what I started with.”

“What do you want?”

“What are you offering?”

I roll my eyes and sigh. “You know what I like about you, Dominik? You’re a straight shooter. Don’t ruin that now by acting coy. You want something for the risk. I respect that. Just lay it on me so that I can either accept or walk away.”

Dominik’s jaw flexes. His eyes darken just a little and he licks his lips. “You have three clubs in the city. I want ownership of one of them transferred to me. And I want an additional property. An empty lot, a suburban house, a decrepit shack—I don’t care, as long as I hold the deed.”

“That’s all?”

“And five million dollars. Cash.” He eyes me carefully, waiting for me to balk. “I can live without avenging my father

if doing so means risking my Bratva and my reputation in the process.”

“Allying with me will only help your reputation,” I growl.

“Unless you lose.”

“I won’t lose.”

“If you knew that, Mr. Bugrov, you would never have sat down with me in the first place.”

I consider his requests for a moment. “I’ll transfer my least profitable club to you. There’s a small warehouse on the edge of the city that you can have. And as for the money—I’m willing to agree to one million dollars.”

“Four million.”

“Two.”

He lifts his eyebrows. “Agreed.”

We shake hands and Dominik reclines against his high-backed wingchair. I get to my feet. “I’ll be in touch. Until then, prepare your men. I need them ready to move at a moment’s notice.”

“Understood, Mr. Bugrov.”

I give him a parting nod and leave the Barrington’s lounge. Dimiv is standing by the entrance, smoking a cigarette when I approach.

“Well?”

I grab the cigarette from between Dimiv’s fingers and bring it to my lips. “He’s in.”

URI

I've only been gone for a few hours and I actually *miss* her. It's a new feeling and I have no idea how to deal with it. Maybe that's why it annoys me so much to walk into the private hospital room I've paid for to find her laughing it up with Nikolai.

She certainly doesn't look like she's missed me. Hell, she barely seems to register that I've been gone at all.

"What's so funny?" I demand irritably when I walk in and catch them mid-joke.

The laughter dies at once. Nikolai doesn't respond aside from getting up and drifting towards the window. Alyssa just gives me a little wink. "He was sharing stories from your childhood."

"*Our* childhood," Nikolai calls over. "You don't have exclusive rights over those stories, you know."

"Maybe not, but I do have exclusive rights over this room. And I'd like to be alone with Alyssa now."

"Uri!" Alyssa snaps at me. "Don't be rude. Nikolai, it's fine—you can stay."

That annoys me as much as anything else. Nikolai just shrugs. "All good. I'll leave you to Sir Sunshine here. If you need an escape from all his warm optimism, just give me a ring."

Alyssa giggles but tries to suppress it behind a cough. The moment the door pulls shut, I turn to her. She reads my face and rolls her eyes at once. "He was kidding, Uri." Reaching

out to me, she asks, “Can you walk that grumpy face over here, please? If not, I’m coming over there.”

Sighing, I go to her bedside. She’s dressed in white sweatpants and a matching sweater. But as comfortable as she looks, it just doesn’t fit. Nice though it may be, there’s no escaping the fact that we’re stuck in a hospital room. She should be back home, in *my* room, in *my* bed, where she belongs.

As I get to her, she takes my hand. “I spoke to Lev and Polly earlier. They’re a little bummed that I have to stay here.”

“That makes three of us.”

“The next few weeks will fly by. And anyway, you and Nikolai will keep me company, right?”

“Babysitting is definitely more his speed, but Nikolai has shit to do.”

She narrows her eyes. “Will you stop being such an ass about your brother?”

“I didn’t realize you were so protective of him.”

“Well, I am,” she retorts firmly. “The same as I am with Polly and Lev. The only difference is you don’t revert to a moody, hyper-jealous teenage boy around those two. That’s reserved for Niko. It’s giving me unnecessary anxiety, Uri.”

She squeezes my hand to really lay it on thick, but I scowl and pull my fingers away from her. “I’ll go easy on him when he stops flirting with my woman.”

“*Flirting?*” she repeats. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“It’s typical Nikolai bullshit. He’s always wanted what I have.”

Instead of responding, Alyssa’s face spreads in a slow, subtle smile. An in-joke kind of smirk that makes my hackles rise. “The hell is so funny?” I grumble.

“The whole jealousy thing is kinda cute.” She pokes the back of my hand where it’s lying on top of her sheets. “Definitely a turn-on.”

“I’m not jealous of anyone. Least of all my brother.”

“Mhmm,” she murmurs pointedly, dancing her hands up my chest. She doesn’t sound like she believes me in the least. At this point, I don’t even believe myself.

Snarling in irritation, I grab the back of her neck and push her flat on her back. Her startled little gasp is cut off when I press my lips down onto hers, kissing her hard and heavy until she’s completely breathless.

“Oh my,” she gasps when I finally let her up for air. “Where did *that* come from?”

“You are driving me crazy,” I growl. “That’s where that came from.”

She smiles coquettishly. “Crazy, huh? Poor man... the things you have to go through.” She pushes at the buttons of my shirt with her finger and the possessive beast in me roars to life.

What better way of leaving my mark on her than fucking her senseless? Except, of course, for the little problem standing between us and an epic fuck. Or more specifically, the *two* little problems standing between us and an epic fuck.

And yet...

Rough sex may be off the table. But a little fooling around might not hurt.

I grab her legs and reel her in towards me. “Uri!” she yelps. She tries to sit up but I keep a tight grip on her ankles and lock them around my waist. “Uri!”

Before she can do anything else, I slip my hand inside of her sweats and right into her panties. She lets out a strangled gasp that dies beautifully on her lips, her eyes going wide as my fingers slide inside of her.

“U-Uri... the d-door. It’s open. Anyone can walk... right... *aah...*”

She collapses onto the bed as I work her tight little pussy. She can whine and protest all she wants, but the wetness slicking my fingers is singing a completely different song.

“What are you... *mmm...* doing to me...?” she moans, trying to push me away and trying to pull me deeper all at the same

time.

I bend low to blanket her with my body. “I’m trying to show you exactly who you belong to,” I growl in her ear. “Tell me, my little thief, who do you belong to?”

“Y-you,” she gasps. “Only you.”

“I can’t hear you.”

“*You!*”

I smile wickedly. “That’s more like it.”

She starts riding her hips on my hand. I add a second finger and a third. She’s got her own fingers wrapped around my wrist and clamped tight. It’d take the jaws of fucking life to pull me out of her right now.

Spicy little kiska.

And she’s all fucking mine.

“Mmm... oh God, Uri, I’m gonna... I’m gonna... aah...”

Her juices flow over my fingers and I watch her face light up and tremble from the euphoria of her orgasm. There’s nothing quite as gorgeous as Alyssa’s face drenched in the heat of pleasure and satisfaction.

Before she can gather herself, the door pushes open and Nikolai walks in, catching me with my hand in the cookie jar. Alyssa gasps, pushing me away as her face turns beet red and ripping the sheets up over her lower half.

Nikolai looks pretty close to blushing himself as his eyes dart from side to side without ever landing on either Alyssa or me. “Sorry,” he mumbles.

The only one who seems remotely at ease is me. I’ve stamped my mark pretty clearly now and I’m almost glad my brother is around to see it. I lick a finger and Alyssa’s jaw drops. “*Stop,*” she hisses.

I ignore her and turn to Nikolai. “I thought I told you to give us some privacy.”

“If I’d known *why*, I’d have stayed clear, trust me,” he says awkwardly. “But this is important. Evanoff is trying to reach you. He said he called a few times but you didn’t answer.”

“Fuck,” I mutter as I pull out my phone. Sure enough, there are three missed calls from Dominik that had gone unnoticed because of my preoccupation with the red-faced temptation in front of me.

I sweep out of the room as I dial him back. Dr. Grigory is chatting with a few young nurses in the hallway, but they disperse quickly when they see me come out of the room.

“I’ve been trying to get in touch with you,” Dominik intones the moment he picks up.

“I was indisposed. What’s happening?”

“I know where Boris and Artur are hiding.”

URI

I leave Nikolai behind with Alyssa. Pain in the ass though he may be, he's the only person I trust to protect her the way that I would. To his credit, he doesn't even seem disappointed to be left out of the impending fight. He takes it on the chin with a somber expression and a nod.

"Kill the bastard," is all he says to me.

I intend to.

Dimiv and I make our way to the meeting point where Dominik said he would be waiting. Evanoff has thirty men with him, which brings our number up to ninety. Any more and we risk drawing unwanted attention from the authorities as we move around the city.

I drive my jeep up alongside Dominik's and roll down the window. "Well?"

"We follow the road down until we reach the house. There's open land on two sides and dense forest on the remaining two. Surrounding it is a no-go; we're blocked off from the west point."

I nod. "Is there a gate? Security? Cameras?"

"Low gate, nothing the trucks can't pass over. Little in the way of exterior cameras, but the place is teeming with Sobakin soldiers. They're on edge. Boris is in there; I have no doubt."

I nod, licking my lips in excitement for what's to come. "Then we go in guns blazing. I'm not interested in prisoners."

Dominik holds up a finger. “They’re going to see us coming.”

“Let them,” I growl. “I want them to know that death is on their doorstep. Follow me. We’re going in.”

Engines rev behind me. On my count, I bark into the radio and we go ripping down the road, a tidal wave of dark-tinted cars coming down on Sobakin’s hideout like a plague. As we approach the gate, I can see the furor of his men as they start to understand what’s coming for them.

The sentries at the outermost points start scrambling for walkie-talkies or running to sniper positions. The few bullets they manage to spray in our direction go bouncing harmlessly off the armor-plated exteriors. I step on the accelerator and start speeding towards the gate.

Dimiv grabs hold of the roof handle of the jeep and braces himself for impact. We both know I’m not going to stop until we’ve blasted through that cheap piece of metal. It’s almost insulting that Sobakin would think he’s safe here. He thinks a few armed men and a five-foot gate will protect him from me?

He’ll learn soon just how wrong he was.

The few guards foolish enough to have stayed in place this long jump out of the way just in time. We crash into the gate and it shatters under my hood, its black frame splitting in two and screaming in protest as my wheels flatten it into corrugated tin.

I duck low as heavier waves of bullets start peppering the jeep. They do no more damage than the first barrage, but they do confirm that we’re into the thick of the hornet’s nest now.

I spin the jeep around, kicking up a dust storm that allows me to drive in a little further until we’re practically at the door of the modest two-storey house.

Dimiv and I pop out on the safe side and take up positions. I pick off three, four, five Sobakin soldiers when they rear their heads above the low wall lining the roof. When the coast is clear, I pick out a path up and shimmy up the gutter until I’m high enough to slip in through a second-floor window.

The room I land in is weirdly empty. Through the walls, I can hear the thump of gun recoil and the groans of men as they're decimated by my Bratva and Dominik's. I pause and wait with my ears perked, but it seems I've snuck in unnoticed.

Or at least, that's what I thought. But as soon as I take a step toward the door to venture further into the house, it bursts open. I don't even wait to see who I'm shooting. I raise my gun and unload a trio of shots.

Two bodies hit the ground, bleeding from new holes in their foreheads. A third man spins back out of the room with a scream.

I lunge after and find him crawling away on his hands and knees, leaking blood from where my first shot caught him in the shoulder. I execute him quickly with a swift bullet to the back of the skull.

He screams again just before he dies. But the sound of that and of his body hitting the floor draws attention I was hoping to avoid. More faces appear at the end of the hall. I fire blindly, enough to buy myself some time to move, then duck and load a fresh clip into my gun.

I'm getting ready to pop back out and trade gunfire when *CRASH!*—the skeleton of the house shivers. If I had to guess, I'd say someone's run a car right into the foundation somewhere. It's a sufficient distraction for me to eliminate the rat's nest of Sobakin *mudaks* who'd been waiting for me to stick my head out again. Four bodies drop in quick succession.

I charge deeper into the house. My only purpose now is finding that motherfucker, Boris. I don't even care about Artur Agapov at this point. If we manage to get the asshole, it will only be a bonus.

Boris Sobakin is the entrée.

As a smoky body comes around the corner, I raise my gun, but his arms go up in surrender almost immediately. "Don't shoot!" he cries out.

"*Blyat*, Dimiv," I snarl. "Nearly took your head off."

He slides into place beside me. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean you infiltrated the house by yourself, no backup, nothing,” he hisses. “I look away for one second and when I turn back, you’re crawling up a goddamn gutter like you think you’re Catwoman. There’s, like, twenty men in here at least and only one of you.”

“I wanted to give them a fair opportunity.” I crack my neck. “Come on, we need to keep moving. The longer it takes to find Sobakin, the better chance he has of getting away.”

“Word is Agapov is somewhere downstairs. We’ve got him surrounded.”

I grit my teeth. “I don’t give a fuck about Agapov. Live or die, he’s not why we came here.”

We rove through, clearing room after room, but most are devoid of life. I’m starting to lose hope when we find a closed door at the end of the hall.

I rush towards it and kick it down with one powerful blow. It flies back on its hinges, sending splints of wood flying everywhere. The room is empty...

Except for the curtains flapping around the breeze coming through the open window. Beyond that is just dark forest.

“No,” I growl in disbelief, running towards the window. “No...”

I sprint to the window just in time to see Boris vanishing between tree trunks. I wait and watch for any sign of him—then I see the telltale twin flash of headlights.

“Motherfucker had a getaway car waiting for him.” I fire helplessly into the distance, but there’s no chance in hell I’m nailing him from here. The lights grow smaller and dimmer as the car backs away until the darkness swallows them up, too.

“He’s gone. He’s fucking *gone*.”

I twist around, turning my back on the window, furious that I came *this* goddamn close, only to have Sobakin slip through my fingers. That's when I notice the man cowering in the corner of the room beside the door, his face drenched with sweat, his leg clearly broken and bent in a way that legs are not supposed to bend.

I walk over to him and point my gun in his face. "No! No. Please! Don't kill me. I can give you information!" Frothy spit flies out of his mouth as he talks.

"This better be worth my while," I glower down at him. "Go on. You have ten seconds."

"H-h-he g-got a call. Right before you showed up. He locked himself in this room and got one of the men to bring the car around to the forest entrance. I-I didn't know why until... until we were attacked."

"So he was warned. I could've told you that myself." I raise my gun and shoot the son of a bitch in the face before he can beg for his life. Then I walk outside to the lingering carnage of the fight.

Dominik is standing outside the house, taking down Sobakin's men execution-style one by one. I have to respect a *pakhan* who handles the dirty work himself. He turns to me, blood and sweat smearing his face. "Well?"

"He escaped. He was warned."

Dominik's eyes narrow and he points out the soot-stained runt being restrained by two of his soldiers. "If you have any questions for Artur Agapov, I'd ask them now."

I shake my head. "Sobakin was using Artur. He wouldn't have trusted him with anything. Kill him."

Dominik shrugs and points for his men to do as I said. I don't even bother to watch as Artur swallows his last breath, followed by the bullet that steals it from him.

"This isn't over," I tell Dominik. "Not until Sobakin is dead. You'll get your money after it's done."

Dominik just nods, the bloodlust still churning in his eyes as he turns towards the line of soon-to-be dead men and resumes his bloody work.

Dimiv emerges from the house a few moments later. He's on the phone with someone but he hangs up as he runs towards me. "I got word from my contact in Russia. It looks like Elena Chernoff and her son are bound for the States."

"He's bringing them home?"

"Sure seems that way."

I nod. "Then he's going to try and meet up with them at some point." My jaw clenches. I'm more determined now than ever. "He's going to fuck up soon. And I'm going to be there to take advantage."

"What about this place?" Dimiv asks, jerking a thumb at the bullet-riddled house behind us.

"Burn it and everyone in it to the ground." I turn towards my jeep. "Move out!" I order my men. "We're done here."

Just as I get into my vehicle, a call comes in. *Nikolai*. "What's going on?" I ask urgently. He wouldn't call unless it was important.

"Brother, it's Alyssa. Grigory just did another scan and... you better get here soon. She needs you."

ALYSSA

I'm crying when Uri walks in.

"Oh my god, Uri! What happened?" I yelp. "Are you alright?" He's covered in sweat and ash and dried blood. Suddenly, it feels trivial to be sitting safely in a hospital bed and crying about my latest scan.

He grabs my hand and brings it to his lips. "Forget about me. Are *you* alright?"

I shake my head. "There's blood on your arm."

"Don't worry. It's not mine."

I shudder. "You're not hurt?"

"It takes more than a couple dozen spineless cowards to hurt Uri Bugrov," he growls. "Now, tell me, why are you crying?"

I gulp back the remainder of my tears and try to ignore the smell of metal and smoke wafting off of him. "Dr. Grigory just did another scan. He's really concerned about one of the babies."

"Another scan? You just had one."

I cringe. "I was... experiencing some discomfort."

His eyes bore into mine. "Discomfort?"

"I guess 'pain' is probably a better word," I admit softly. "And he wanted to be sure everything was alright with the babies. But one is severely underdeveloped. H-he thinks we might..."

I take a deep, shuddering breath. “He thinks we stand a chance of losing one of the babies.”

Uri’s eyes turn brittle and cold. He pulls himself up to full height and walks over to the door. “Get the doctor in here *now*,” he orders someone I can’t see in a terrifying boom before walking back to me.

I can see him start to unravel. Wherever he was before this hasn’t exactly helped him achieve a state of Zen calm. And I badly need him to be calm right now because the truth is, I’m close to unraveling myself.

“Uri, please...”

Before I can finish my thought, Dr. Grigory walks in with tightly pursed lips. Apparently, he already suspects the shitstorm that’s waiting for him inside this room.

“Mr.—”

“Don’t you say my name,” he hisses. “Why is Alyssa scared shitless that we’re going to lose one of our children?”

The doctor swallows uncomfortably. “She was experiencing pain earlier. I conducted a scan that suggests that one of the babies is close to fetal distress.”

“Fetal distress?”

“Not only is the baby not getting enough nutrients, but it may also not be getting enough oxygen. Which means that... well... we might need to consider your options now.”

He’s sweating profusely and I can’t bring myself to blame him. Uri, on the other hand, is looking like he wants to put Grigory’s head through a wall. And there’s enough blood on his arms to prove he certainly could follow through on that threat.

“‘Options’?” Uri growls. “What do you mean, our fucking *options*?”

“Option one: we perform an emergency C-section and take them both out now. But considering how underdeveloped one baby is, we might end up losing it.”

The muscle in Uri's jaw is vibrating. "And the second?"

"We wait. We monitor the situation closely and hope that the weaker baby is able to push through on its own."

"And what if that doesn't happen?" Uri demands. "If the weaker baby goes into fetal distress, can you perform a C-section then?"

"I'm afraid that by then, it might be... too late."

I flinch, trying not to completely lose my shit. But the thought of one of my babies dying inside me—it's too much. It's too damn much.

I've never seen Uri look so *angry*. Though even that word seems insufficient to describe the black fury twisting his features into a man that's almost unrecognizable.

"So you're telling me that my options are to take the babies out now and risk one dying or to keep them both in there and risk one dying anyway? How are *those* the options?"

Dr. Grigory actually takes a step back. "M-Mr. Bugrov," he says formally, "I assure you, we're doing everything we can to ensure both your babies are born safely, but—"

"*But*' is not an option." Uri looms toward the doctor like a beast stalking its prey.

"Our main priority is making sure the mother is healthy and —"

"You don't think her safety is my priority, too?"

"T-that's not what I... I apologize..."

"You are the doctor here. You are supposed to be the expert. I shouldn't have to choose between their lives like I'm playing a game of blackjack. You are supposed to save them all. And in saving their lives, you'll save your own. Because I promise you this: if Alyssa and those two babies don't come out of this unscathed, I will make sure you pay for it."

Dr. Grigory's face isn't pale anymore so much as a lifeless, ashen gray. He stares up at Uri helplessly. "I will try to do my best..."

“Don’t try,” Uri snarls. “Just *do*.”

The doctor stumbles out of the room, but even when we’re alone, Uri doesn’t come back to my bedside. He paces up and down, his face a mask of fury and desperation.

“Uri.”

He doesn’t seem to hear me. “There’s got to be another way. Maybe we can move you to another hospital. Maybe—”

“*Uri*.” He turns abruptly, as though he’s just heard me. “Come here,” I beg him. “Please.”

He moves to the side of my bed and I grab his hand. “Uri, you need to calm down,” I tell him as gently as I can.

His eyes go wide. “Calm down? Alyssa, you heard what that quack had to say—”

“I heard everything just as clearly as you did. But freaking out is not helping the situation, Uri. The stress is not doing me or these babies any favors.”

“We have to figure out a solution, Alyssa,” he snaps. “We can’t just let them make all the decisions for us.”

“They are the professionals, Uri. Dr. Grigory just may know what’s better for me and the babies—”

“If the outcome isn’t two healthy babies, then what the fuck does he know? What the fuck is he good for? I’m going to start looking into other hospitals.”

He reaches for his phone, but I put my hand over his. “Uri, please. You’re not listening to me. A new hospital isn’t going to change anything. What’s the point?”

He scowls at me. “How can you even ask that? The point is what’s best for our children—”

“And moving me in this state is what’s best? You’re not thinking clearly.”

“And you’re not thinking of the bigger picture. Don’t you care about saving both of them?” I rear back as though he’s slapped me. His eyes narrow and he sighs deeply. “Fuck, that came out wrong. I didn’t mean that.”

I blink at him, trying to fight my fear and find grace. He's hurting just as much as I am. He's probably just as scared, too.

"Uri," I whisper, "I'm terrified that we might lose one of these babies. Which is why I need you to take a breath and calm down. I need you in this *with* me. We have to be in this together. I love how protective you are of all of us, but you can't let it cloud your judgment. You can't let it control you." He's silent for a long time, his eyes flickering from my face to my belly. I pull his hand to my chest. "Please. For me."

He takes a deep breath and brings my hand to his lips. "You know I'm with you, no matter what, *narushitel*."

I haven't always been sure of that. Our journey has been riddled with complications—minefields at every turn.

But right here, right now?

I am sure.

ALYSSA

I wake up to the weight of a hand over my arm.

And my first thought in those first few seconds of blissful oblivion is, *Ziva's here.*

Even when we had the option of having separate rooms, we chose to stay together. Privacy wasn't really a thing for either one of us. We were twins; we were ride-or-die. We chose to stay together because together, we were stronger, we were safer, we were braver.

And then the choice was taken away from us.

I blink my eyes open and glance down at the hand draped over my elbow. Slowly, that peaceful state of oblivion starts to crackle.

Then it fades away entirely.

Oh, that's right... Ziva's not here. Ziva's not anywhere anymore.

It's just me.

It used to be that I'd wake up forgetting that she was gone and that moment of realization was like losing her all over again. I would sit in my bed and cry into my pillow, trying frantically to recall her scent, to remember what it felt like to wake up to her cold feet seeking comfort underneath my legs.

But now?

It's the first time that I've remembered that she's gone *without* feeling like my world is ending all over again.

Today, I feel the acceptance hit first. Then gratitude.

Ziva's no longer here. But I don't feel so alone anymore. I don't feel as though it's me against the world anymore. And that's because of the weight of the hand draped over my arm.

I turn slowly and stare at the man lying next to me in the bed he had brought in specially for my little forced hospital sojourn. This is the first time I've caught Uri sleeping. He usually falls asleep after me and wakes up long before I do.

I marvel at how peaceful he looks. Each and every perfect feature on his face—even the scars, the frown lines. The man is a work of art. Beautiful in every way, and all the more so for the visible proof of what he's suffered through to keep his family safe.

I don't dare touch him for fear of waking him up. But I am itching to run my fingers down the straight line of his nose, the sharp slant of his jaw. His eyelashes are so *long*. Why haven't I noticed that before?

He's also got a tiny brown birthmark just underneath his left eye that I'd always assumed was a freckle. He's just never stayed still long enough for me to notice all those little nuances that make his face one of one.

He insisted on staying at the hospital with me overnight. Even after I ordered him away to go be with Lev and Polly, he refused. "*Polly and Lev will be fine. They've got Nikolai and Dimiv looking out for them. You need me more.*"

It was probably the first time it really hit me: *I'm not alone. Not anymore. Not ever again.*

He breathes deeply and his eyes start to flutter open. I lean in, finally giving in to my desire to touch him. My fingers drift down his cheek and those hazy blue eyes focus on me.

"I was beginning to wonder if you ever slept."

He smiles and I marvel at how soft he seems right now. It can only come from the vulnerability of watching someone sleep and knowing that they trust you enough to lose themselves in unconsciousness.

He kisses me gently on the lips. “Even I need rest occasionally.”

“I like watching you sleep.”

As I laugh, his lips fall against my neck and I moan, my body responding immediately to his touch. Despite my growing belly and the slight twinge running down my spine, I feel myself moisten eagerly.

“Uri...”

“Hm?”

I can feel his erection against my leg and my desire for him outweighs any and all sense of caution. I try to shimmy down, but I’m not moving so sneakily or gracefully these days.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he tuts.

“Just wanted to say good morning to the soldier saluting me downstairs.”

Desire washes across his face but he grips my elbow and refuses to let me sink down on the bed. “He appreciates that. But it’s not about him right now.”

Before I can stop him, Uri is sliding his hand up under the hem of the thin cotton slip I’m wearing. “Uri,” I gasp. “Wait... wait...”

“Why?”

“I want to do something for *you*.”

He chuckles. “The fact that you think I don’t enjoy this is insane.”

“Well, fine. But I want to return the favor.”

He slides two fingers inside me, forcing my legs apart. “And you will—once those babies are delivered safely and you’re out of the woods.”

It’s very hard to state my case when he keeps stroking my clit like that. It’s hard to say anything at all that isn’t just “*more*.”

“I um... *ahh*... stop!” I hiss, trying to sidle away from me. “You’re distracting me.”

“That’s the whole point, *narushitel*.”

“Shouldn’t we be taking it easy?” I ask, chewing on my bottom lip.

He glares at me from between those extra-long lashes that I’d only noticed today. “‘Taking it easy’ is exactly why I’m getting you off with my fingers instead of my cock.”

He thrusts those fingers inside me on the word ‘cock’ and I let out a desperate moan. “Maybe we should make an exception today.”

He chuckles. “My needy little *kiska*, if it were up to me, I would gladly fuck you in every damn position known to man. But for now—” He starts rubbing my clit in tight little circles and pressure builds low and hot in my belly. “—we have to be careful.”

“Fuck being care—oh, *God!*”

Just when I’m on the brink of orgasm, he pulls his fingers out. I feel the loss of him instantly, but I squeeze the handrails of the hospital bed until I remember how to speak again. “Did you change your mind?” I taunt breathlessly. “Is it my turn?”

He gives me a saucy grin. “Hardly.” Then he grabs me from under my knees and pulls me towards him until my pussy collides with his face. “Now, pipe down. I like silence when I eat.”

Before I can think of a clever response, his tongue passes over the swollen lips of my pussy and my eyes flutter shut. “*Ohh...*”

I shove a knuckle into my mouth to keep from screaming. We’re not at the mansion anymore; we’re in a hospital. With adjoining wards. Other patients. Doctors walking around with clipboards.

It’s not exactly the optimal setting for mind-blowing orgasms.

And yet that’s exactly what I have. Mind-blowing orgasms. *Three* of them, one after the other, each one more intense than the last. As far as hospitalizations go, this one isn’t so bad.

Certainly beats the last time I was in one of these death houses.

I'm a dripping mess by the time Uri moves back up and tucks me into the crook of his arm. I've just about managed to catch my breath and pull my clothing into place when we hear a knocking at the door.

Dr. Grigory walks in with two nurses in tow. I can guess where his head's at: there's safety in numbers.

"Good morning," I chirp in a wobbly voice. I'm still feeling the aftereffects of multiple orgasms oozing through my veins like honey.

He gives me a forced smile and shoots a quick glance in Uri's direction. "Let's get you examined, shall we?"

Straight to business today, it seems. He conducts the exam in silence, both nurses hovering over him like sentinels. I keep waiting for him to tell us something good, clinging to the hope that something has changed overnight.

Please. Please. Please.

Finally, when I can't take it anymore, I just ask the question outright. "Do you have good news for us?"

Dr. Grigory looks down at his clipboard and I know instinctively that's a bad sign. If it were good news, he'd have just told it to us straight.

The doctor clears his throat. "I'm sorry, Alyssa. One baby's vitals have dropped considerably. I doubt it will get any better without intervention. I'm afraid it's time for the two of you to make a decision."

I glance at Uri. His arms are crossed tight across his chest, his face stormy and brooding. "And our options are to operate now and deliver both babies or wait it out and hope?"

Dr. Grigory nods. "My medical recommendation? We go in now and deliver those babies by Cesarean. You're close enough to thirty weeks that the weaker baby has a chance of survival. And the risk to you will be lower as well."

“Okay,” Uri decides without so much as glancing my way.
“Then let’s do it.”

“Wait!”

Both Uri and the doctor turn to me sharply. Dr. Grigory puts down his clipboard and gets to his feet. “Alyssa, you’re going to have to be on constant bed rest if you continue with this pregnancy. The slightest issue could cause premature labor or fetal distress.”

“But if I do, then the weaker baby will have the chance to grow a little more, get stronger. Right?”

Dr. Grigory groans, pained. “Er, well, yes, theoretically speaking—”

“Then I’ll wait.”

“Alyssa—”

“Give me a number. Put a number on it and then I’ll decide for good.”

He twists back and forth like he’d rather sacrifice a finger than pick a number. “Alyssa—” he tries again.

“*Please,*” I say. “In your expert opinion, just give me an educated guess.”

He sighs, his shoulders drooping forward and that damned clipboard dangling loosely between his fingertips. “Thirty percent. Forty tops.”

I nod. “Then I think I should wait. I can do it. I can keep these babies safe until it’s time for them to be born.”

“*Ty, dolzhno byt’, shutish’ nado mnoy!*” My head swivels towards Uri, who’s glaring down at me with shock and outrage. “Are you fucking serious?”

Dr. Grigory clears his throat and retreats toward the exit, mumbling, “We’ll give the two of you a moment.” Then he and his nurses scurry out of the room like mice clearing a burning building.

I shove myself upright in bed. “If I let them deliver these babies now, there’s a sixty to seventy percent chance that we’ll

lose one!”

“And if we *don't* let them deliver those babies now, we're running the risk of losing one baby anyway *and* losing you.”

I square my jaw. “I'm willing to take that risk.”

“No.”

My eyes go wide. “No?”

“I'm saying no,” Uri growls. “As the father of those babies—”

“Screw you! You may be the father, but *I'm* the mother and *I'm* the one carrying them. My body, my decision!”

Uri's hands are clenched into fists. His eyes are flared with danger—and once upon a time, I would've done anything he told me to do if he said it while he looked like that.

But things have changed. I'm not the scared little girl dangling on the fence anymore. The game has gone up a level, the stakes have raised, and somewhere along the way, Uri showed me how to be stronger. How to stand my ground.

He has only himself to blame for my defiance now. Terrifying though he may be, my fear of losing a child is greater.

“Don't do this,” he rasps as he grabs my hand. “Don't do this. We'll still have one baby. And we can make more if that's what you want. I don't want to risk your life in the process.”

It's the most earnest request he's ever made. And if I hadn't lived through losing a sister, he might have stood a chance of swaying me. But as it stands, I know I can't make any other decision.

“This is my choice, Uri. I don't need your blessing or your permission; I just need your support.”

His eyes go cold. He drops my hand. The next thing I know, he's storming out of the room. And no matter how desperately I call after him, he doesn't stay.

He doesn't even spare me a glance before the door slams shut.

URI

The whole point is to storm out to show Alyssa how I feel about her choice. But I only get as far as the hallway right outside her door. Going farther than that feels like ripping out my own heart. So I pace up and down, unable to justify actually leaving the hospital. Even moving out of sight of her room is impossible.

The truth is, no matter how pissed off I am with her, no matter how unreasonable I think she's being, I can't bring myself to leave her. Not now. Not after everything we've been through. The most I can do is prowl the corridors like a caged beast and shoot furious glances at her door when I pass.

The nurses stay clear of me and no one dares approach me until Nikolai, who walks down the hall with two cups of coffee in hand. He takes one look at my face and offers me a cup. "Not sure you should be drinking caffeine right now, but here you go."

I take the cup and have a sip. It's strong, just the way I like it. And it burns on the way down, just like I need.

"Are you gonna tell me why you look like you wanna burn down the hospital?" A nurse happens to pass at that very moment and she throws us a startled, wide-eyed glance. Nikolai gives her a sheepish grin in return. "Just a figure of speech, don't worry."

She doesn't look all that soothed as she continues down the hallway.

“Is it Alyssa?” he asks once we’re alone again. “Is she okay? Is it the babies?”

I try to breathe through my frustration. “Grigory thinks the babies should be delivered now. He thinks it’s the best chance for Alyssa and for the healthier baby.”

Nikolai raises his eyebrows. ““The healthier baby”?”

I sigh and close my eyes. The bitter taste of the coffee lingers on my tongue like motor oil. “The weaker baby may not make it.”

“And what does Alyssa think?”

“Alyssa wants to wait.” I grit my teeth and wait until the tide of anger recedes a bit before continuing. “She thinks she can hold out until the weaker baby is stronger.”

It pisses me off that Nikolai doesn’t look as enraged as I feel right now. In fact, he nods with an expression that looks suspiciously like understanding. “She wants to try and do her best for the second baby.”

“At the cost of her own life?” I hiss. “Her pregnancy is high-risk, Nikolai. If one of the babies experiences fetal distress, we’re talking about an emergency C-section that could result in infection and severe blood loss. She could *die*.”

“She’s a mother,” Nikolai says simply. “Of course she would think that’s a worthy risk.”

“The doctors are supposed to tell her otherwise. I should’ve sent Grigory to fucking Norilsk years ago.”

Nikolai coughs on his sip of coffee. Norilsk is the most frozen, isolated shithole in all of Russia. It’s not a threat to be made lightly. “Grigory’s been with us for years. He knows his shit.”

“I’m about to make him *eat* his shit if he doesn’t save them all.”

Sighing, my brother claps me on the shoulder. “I get it; you’re scared. But right now, you need to support her. Fighting her will get you nowhere.”

I fix him with a snide glare. “Of course you’re taking her side. Fucking figures.”

“‘Her side’?” Nikolai balks. “I wasn’t aware there were ‘sides’ here. We’re all one family now, Uri.”

“Is that what you would like me to believe?”

His brow lifts up higher. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“You think I haven’t noticed how close you’ve become to Alyssa? The long conversations, the inside jokes, the way you look at her?”

His eyes go wide with shock at first. Then they narrow with anger. “I’m not even gonna dignify that vile shit you just spewed with a response. You are my brother; she’s my friend. I just happen to believe that, as the mother who’s carrying those babies, Alyssa has the right to make the final decision on what she wants to do, how long she wants to carry for, and how she gets to bring them into this world.”

I glower at him. “I preferred it when you hated her.”

I’m painfully aware that I’m not being my best self at this moment, but the fear is clouding out any calm I might’ve otherwise had. All I can concentrate on is the fact that I have absolutely no control over any of this and it’s making me want to break shit.

“I never hated Alyssa,” Nikolai retorts defensively. “I just wanted to avoid bringing her into this kind of situation. I didn’t think it was a responsible decision to involve a civilian into our world. And look what’s happened since then—obviously, I was right.”

“So this is all my fault then—is that what you’re trying to say?”

“Get your head out of your ass, Uri! I’m not blaming you; I’m not blaming anyone. What’s happened has happened. This is the situation we’re in and you have to decide what kind of man you want to be. Don’t you get it? This is not about you at all. This is about Alyssa and those babies. She thinks about those babies she’s carrying and she sees herself and her sister. Losing one of the twins would be like losing Ziva all over

again. Why do you think she's so determined to save *both* of them? Because she couldn't save her sister!"

Well, fuck. Nothing like harsh truth being thrown in your face to make you wake the hell up.

"Goddammit," I mutter under my breath.

Nikolai eyes me warily. "It's time for you to step up, little brother. It's time to see what you're made of when you can't control every little thing around you."

"She talks to you about Ziva?" I ask grudgingly.

He shrugs. "I talk to her about losing Mother and Otets. She talks to me about losing her sister. It's what *friends* do."

I feel a tiny kernel of guilt for my earlier accusations like a shard of glass in my chest—but I'm still too pigheaded, too riled up, too much *myself* to actually apologize for any of it.

I mean, I should be happy they're close. He's my brother and she's my... my...

I turn towards Alyssa's ward door as something deep and visceral stirs in my gut. Without saying a word, I push my half-drunk coffee cup into Nikolai's free hand and drift numbly into Alyssa's ward. She's holding her elbows tucked tight to her abdomen like she can't get warm no matter how hard she tries.

"You okay?" I ask as I slip into the room.

She snuffles but doesn't answer.

I venture closer. Every step in her direction is harder than the last. It's like I'm being sucked into a black hole—I can't tear myself away, no matter how much I try. It's just blissful oblivion. Inevitable. Inexorable.

Alyssa looks like she feels the same pressure consuming us. Before I even get halfway across the room, frantic words burst from her lips. "If you're coming back to try to talk me out of continuing with this pregnancy, don't bother, Uri, because it's not going to happen. I've—"

"That's not what I came here to do."

“Oh.” She looks surprised. “Okay then.”

“I’m here to tell you that we’ll do things your way.” Those words feel like acid coming off my tongue but I force myself to say them anyway. “I’m going to support your decision.”

Her face brightens with a smile. “Really?”

“Really. *But—*” The smile drops off her face immediately. “—only on one condition.”

“Which is what?”

“Marry me.”

She stares at me blankly for a moment. “E-excuse me?”

“I want you to marry me,” I repeat. “That’s the condition of my agreeing with your ridiculous and reckless decision to continue with this pregnancy.”

Her jaw drops. “Did you just propose to me?” She looks down at her hospital robe as though she should be wearing something else. “Here? Now? Like *this*?”

“When better? Where better?” I cross the last distance and stand by her side. All I want is to touch her, to feel her warmth against mine, but it’s like there’s something invisible holding me back just a little bit longer. “I want to marry you. I want us to go into this together as husband and wife. I want you to be mine, Alyssa.”

Her bottom lip starts to tremble. “Uri...”

“I can have someone here within the hour to marry us. Hell, I can even get the ward decorated if you want things to look pretty.”

Tears accumulate like morning dew in those dazzling eyes of hers. “W-what about friends and family? Polly and Lev? Elle?”

“I’ll get all of them down here immediately if that’s what you want.”

“You want to do this *today*?”

I nod. "I refuse to wait another day to make you my wife. That's my condition. Do you accept?"

She seems incapable of speaking for one long, breathless moment. But then her hand slips into mine. She blinks and a tear slips down her cheek as she smiles.

"I do."

ALYSSA

I'm getting married. I have to repeat it to myself a couple of times before it starts to sink in.

I'm getting married.

I'm getting *married*.

I'm getting married!

While Uri's on the phone with the florist, organizing flowers for the hospital chapel, I call Elle. "Hey, you," she chirps. "I was wondering where—"

"Elle, I have big news."

"Your life is a freaking movie at this point, isn't it?"

A burst of laughter escapes my lips. Considering the choice I was faced with this morning, I didn't think I'd experience this kind of blissful euphoria on the same day. Life's not a movie—it's a roller coaster with the brakes removed.

"First off, I'm in the hospital."

There's a beat of silence. "Okay, now, the happiness makes a lot less sense." I don't blame her; she knows how much I hate hospitals. "Is everything alright?"

"Well, I mean, yes and no. It's... complicated."

"Isn't it always?"

She has a point. I take a breath and launch into my explanation. "My pregnancy is high-risk. One of the babies isn't developing as fast as the other."

“Oh my God—”

“But it’s okay,” I cut in with renewed determination. “Because I’m going to keep these babies inside of me long enough to make sure they can survive outside of me. *Both* of them.”

“Is that what the doctors are recommending?”

“It’s what *I’ve* decided, Elle.”

“Hon—”

“Listen, Elle, I love you to death, but I’m not calling for your approval or your advice. I’ve made my decision. I’m calling because I’m getting married in an hour and I want you to be my maid of honor. I know it’s short notice but it would mean the world to me if you were here.” The silence stretches on for ages and ages. “Um... Elle?”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but did you say you were getting *married?!?*”

“Er, yes, that’s correct.”

“To Uri?”

“No. To Prince William. Duh, *of course* to Uri.”

“Jesus *Christ!*” Elle exclaims.

I laugh. “Is that a ‘*yes, I’d gladly be your maid of honor?*’”

“Yes! Yes! Yes, I’d gladly be your maid of honor.”

“Awesome,” I squeal. “I’m at St. Mary’s Memorial Hospital. Floor seven, ward three, room seventeen.”

“Oh my God,” Elle breathes. I can hear her pacing around anxiously. “I’m all tingly. I can’t believe this is happening.”

“That makes two of us.”

“An hour?”

“Uri said he didn’t want to wait another day without making me his wife.”

“Damn!” she whistles. “That’s a good line. Okay, first thing’s first: gotta get my maid of honor hat on. Do you need me to do anything? Get anything before I come to the hospital?”

“Actually, yes.”

“Hit me. Anything. Say it and it’s yours. Food, makeup, even a ___”

“I need a wedding dress.”

Elle just starts cackling. “That’s a lot of pressure, babe.”

“I trust you. There’s no one better to pick out my dress. Just keep in mind that I’m seven months pregnant.”

She lets out a long, weary breath. “Okay. I’m on it. I’m freaking out and I’m definitely gonna get ulcers, for which I’ll send you the hospital bill, but I’m on it. See you soon! Love you, Lys.”

I hang up to see Uri looking at me with an amused smirk. “She sounded excited. I could hear her screeching from across the room.”

“She was. She’s bringing over a dress for me to wear. I know this is a shotgun wedding and all, but I wanna look pretty.” I glance down at my big belly. “Well, as pretty as I can look with this massive stomach, anyway.”

He growls and that heat flashes in his eyes like bombs exploding. “If I had it my way, you’d get married in nothing at all, precisely so I could see you curvy with my kids, *kiska*.”

I blush every bit as hot as Uri’s eyes. “Don’t talk like that in public,” I mumble. “You’re going to make me do unreasonable things.”

He chuckles and takes my hand. “What about your parents? If you want them here, I can have a car pick them up.”

I cringe. In the hoopla and excitement of the last hour, I completely forgot about my parents. “Shit. Is it terrible that I didn’t even think about them?”

“Considering they’ve checked in on you only twice in the last eight months, I’d say it’s completely justified.”

I give him a grateful smile. “They don’t even know I’m pregnant,” I whisper. “I don’t think this is the right setting to introduce them to you. I’ll just tell them about it afterwards.”

“After we’re married? Or after the babies are delivered?”

I frown. “One of those two. I’ll decide later.”

He’s chuckling again when the door flies open and Polly rushes in. “Oh my *God!* I can’t believe you guys are actually doing it. And in a freaking hospital, no less!” I hold my arms out and she rushes into them. “We’re going to be sisters now!”

I’ll admit, I feel a little aching tug at my heartstrings when she says that. *Sister.* I love Polly, of course. I just wish Ziva was here for this, too.

I disentangle myself from her and hold her at arm’s length. “Polly, will you do my makeup and hair?”

“Of course!” she says excitedly.

This is the first time she’s looked and sounded like herself. Like she was before the kidnapping. It warms my heart to think that, in some small way, Uri and I have contributed to making her feel safe and calm and happy again.

“But *first,*” Polly turns to her brother with a pointed expression, “you’ve got to go.”

“Go?” he says with a frown. “Why?”

“The groom can’t see the bride before the wedding, remember? And before you start off on your usual ‘blah, blah, I make my own rules because I’m so big and tough’ nonsense, don’t even bother. It’s tradition and we’re going to honor it. Now, *scram.*”

Laughing, Uri drops a kiss onto my forehead and heads out the door. Polly starts plucking stuff from her duffel bag, giving me a sneaky suspicion that she’d planned on getting me ready whether I asked her to or not.

“Where’s Lev, by the way?”

“In the chapel with Nikolai and Dimiv. He’s helping them get it ready. And by ‘help,’ I mean he’s sitting in the corner playing video games on his phone.”

“Is he going to be okay? Like, during the ceremony and stuff?”

“We’re not lighting any candles and it’s going to be a small ceremony, so he should be fine. Don’t worry about any of that, okay? This is *your* day. Let us take care of the rest.”

URI

“Well, I’ll be damned!” Dimiv exclaims when he walks into the transformed church chapel.

The place has undergone one hell of a facelift. What was once a bland, featureless room is now decked out in white roses and fairy lights strung across the ceiling like stars. It smells fresh, fragrant, and the air ripples with warmth. The cake that Nikolai ordered arrived a few minutes ago and is standing proudly on a stool in the corner. Two tiny figurines, a groom in a tuxedo and a blushing bride in a white gown, decorate the top.

It’s the cheesiest thing I’ve ever seen.

It’s fucking perfect.

“I can’t believe it,” Dimiv muses. “My eternal bachelor of a cousin, getting married.”

I laugh, eyeing the bottle of vodka in his hand. “You were supposed to get the rings, you drunk bastard.”

He pulls out a tiny black pouch from his jacket pocket and hands it over. “I’ve always been good at multitasking. Two solid gold wedding bands *and* the perfect vodka to toast to.”

“I doubt we have time for a toast.”

He scoffs. “There’s always time for a toast. Especially to mark an auspicious occasion like this one. Where’s Nikolai? We can’t do this without him.”

“He’s bringing the officiant. They should be here soon.”

“Well, then fuck him,” he says with a devilish grin. “Let’s crack this baby open ourselves.”

He opens the bottle and pours out two shot glasses full of vodka. “Y’know, I always thought Nikolai would be the first to get hitched.”

“Yeah. That makes two of us.”

Dimiv lifts his glass into the air. “Well, to marriage in all its many forms. And all the twists and turns it brings. May your roller coaster be everything you want it to be.”

“What fortune cookie did you steal that from?” I taunt.

My cousin throws back his drink and immediately refills it. “Marriage made a poet of me,” he says with a wink. “Do you really think I’d have moved to goddamn Moscow for anyone else? Dagmara changed my whole world, my whole perspective on life. Our fathers liked to take the credit, but she made a man out of me.”

I roll my untouched drink between my fingers thoughtfully. “I used to think you were insane. Leaving the States, moving to Russia, all for a woman.”

Dimiv smirks. “And now?”

I pretend to consider it. “And now... I still think the exact same thing.”

He snorts with laughter. “Take it from a man who’s got nearly a decade of marriage under his belt: keep her happy. She’s always right and you’re always wrong. Happy wife; happy life. You remember that and you’ll stay married a long, long time.”

It’s not bad advice per se; it’s just not for me. Fighting is the slippery slope that led me to this day, to this woman.

“Thanks, cousin. I’m glad you could be here for this.”

“I wouldn’t have missed it for the world.” He beams and rips back the second shot. “Now, I believe it is time for the groom to get ready.” He points toward the back pew. “Suit’s in the bag there. Private room is just a little ways down the hall. Go get pretty—but take it easy on the lipstick this time.”

Chuckling, I pat Dimiv on the shoulder, grab my suit, and duck into the private room that overlooks the hospital's manicured gardens. I stare out the window as I get dressed, trying to wrap my head around the surrealness of this moment. I'm getting dressed for my wedding. I'm going to get married. An hour from now, I'm going to have a *wife*.

It's not something I ever thought I wanted before Alyssa.

When I step back into the chapel, I see Dimiv at the pulpit chatting animatedly with the officiant who's going to marry us. I swear my cousin could talk the ear off a statue. I leave him to the schmoozing and turn to Nikolai, who's just appeared in the doorway of the chapel.

"Took you long enough," I say when I walk up to him. "Where were you?"

"Just checking on the bride. She looks phenomenal."

He'd seen her already? In her dress? That irks me. But I'm willing to be charitable today. After all, it is my wedding day.

"Is everything good to go?"

Nikolai nods. "Yeah. Got the papers right here. We're going legal with this shit."

I smile. "By the way—you're my best man."

"Yeah?"

I slap him on the arm. "Who else?"

We embrace, clapping each other on the back at the same time. Nikolai even looks a little teary-eyed as he turns towards the pulpit, that sentimental bastard. "I'll send Polly a text, tell her that we're—"

Before he can finish his sentence, the doors burst open and Polly appears. Problem is, she's out of breath and wide-eyed. I'm on edge immediately.

"Pol! What's wrong? Is it Alyssa? The babies?"

"Um, I don't know exactly. Alyssa wants to speak to you."

"Is something wrong?"

Her eyebrows pull together tightly. “Yes. No. I-I’m not sure. Just go and talk to her.”

I race out of the chapel without waiting for more half-answers. I’m hurtling around the corridor when I almost run face-first into Dr. Grigory.

“Uri!” He looks shaken as he steps in my path. “I was just coming to find you. There’s something important I need to tell you.”

I frown. “Can it wait? Alyssa needs me.”

I might have just walked away at this point. But there’s something on the doctor’s face that stops me.

Something that reads *trouble*.

“Okay, go ahead. Tell me.”

Grigory’s eyes flicker past me. I glance over my shoulder to find Nikolai and Polly are standing a few feet behind me. He fidgets in place, looking desperately uncomfortable. “What I have to say is best said... in private.”

Yup.

Fucking trouble.



Even after the door shuts behind us in the little adjoining room we’ve stepped into, he does an awkward shuffling dance with his feet.

“Grigory,” I snap impatiently, “get the fuck on with it.”

The doctor’s cheeks flush red. His eyes snap to my face and then away again. He keeps twisting the file in his hands over and over again like he thinks he can wring the words right off the page. I notice the name stamped on the front of it. ***Alyssa Walsh.***

I feel this unexpected combination of possessiveness and urgency. She won’t be Alyssa Walsh for very much longer. A

short walk down the aisle and I'll make her Alyssa Bugrov. She's going to be mine.

One family; one name. One future.

"For fuck's sake, Grigory," I snarl. "I don't have all day. I need to—"

"We did a test," he blurts out. He does that weird shuffling thing with his feet again. "I-it's a non-invasive test we do for all women who might have to undergo preterm deliveries. It's to check the genetic makeup of the child, but mostly, it's to check for the baby's blood type in case of a transfusion."

"I fail to see the problem here, Doctor."

His whole face is blotchy, sweat beading at his temples and above his upper lip. "I've been the doctor for the Bugrov Bratva for a long time now," he whispers in a choked, formal tone. "And my loyalty at the end of the day is to you. Please don't forget that."

I frown. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"I've treated you many times. I know all your scars and surgeries, your medical history, your genetic makeup, your blood type. And... the result of the tests that I conducted on Alyssa's babies suggests... that *you*... are not their father." He lifts his eyes to mine and gulps, the only sound audible in this claustrophobic, damp little room. "I-I'm sorry, I really am. But I ran the test twice just to be sure."

I take an instinctive step forward and Grigory steps back, raising the file as some sort of literal paper shield between us. Her name stares back at me, the letters bold and unrelenting. ***Alyssa Walsh***. The imaginary Bugrov that I could see at the end of her name just a moment ago seems to fade away.

Pulse pounding, I turn my back to the doctor. *How can this be?* She has been under my roof, under my eye, for *months*. Apart from my people, she hasn't had contact with the outside world. Other than the days she was forced to spend under Sobakin's—

I freeze. My body goes cold and immediately, I remember the way I had found her when I'd broken into Sobakin's safe

house. She was lying chained to a bed, her clothes in disarray, that fucking monster leering over her ready to pounce. I thought I arrived in time to save her—but what if she lied to protect me from the truth? What if the worst had already happened? What if that was the second time he had visited her? Or the third? Or the fourth?

My mind is grappling with that possibility when reason starts to kick in. No—she told me that she already suspected she was pregnant by then. She'd said as much to Polly while they were hostages together.

Which means she was pregnant *before* Sobakin's goons stole her away from me.

I try desperately to think of the piece of this puzzle that I'm missing. There's something there that I'm not seeing. *What am I not seeing?*

“U-Uri...?”

I whip around to face Grigory. “You're sure about this?”

He passes me the file. “See for yourself. The results are conclusive. Those babies are not yours. But—”

My eyes snap to his. “But?”

“Based on your DNA and theirs, it seems that the father is... closely related to you.”

I thought I was confused before—but that one really throws me for a loop. I open the file and stare at the results on the paper. I may as well be reading gibberish. None of the numbers, words, or symbols mean anything to me. Disgusted, I close the file and fling it to the floor.

Grigory flinches away from me. “I-I'm sorry, sir.”

“How closely related?”

“Pardon?”

The words are poison coming out of my mouth. It feels like a betrayal even saying it out loud. Then again—genetic makeup doesn't lie. Science doesn't lie.

Brothers, on the other hand...

“Is it possible that we’re talking about a... brother?”

“Yes, it’s possible,” Grigory says with a deep sigh.

So Lev or Nikolai. The moment their names take shape in my head, I know who it is. Lev may have the body of an adult but he’s got the mind of a child. And Alyssa would never have crossed that line with him.

But Nikolai?

In a sudden torrent of memory, I recall every instance I walked into her room to find the two of them sitting together, laughing about some inside joke or sharing some sentimental story with each other. Nikolai opened up to her about our childhood. He doesn’t even talk about that shit with me. But with Alyssa... there are different lines drawn in the sand. Or maybe none at all.

My hands ball into fists when I think about Alyssa assuring me that she and Nikolai were just friends. She was pissed at my own anger, matter of fact. The word *trust* had been bandied about. As though it meant something to her. As though it meant something to *him*.

Fuck.

Fuck.

FUCK!

“Get out of my way,” I hiss as I charge for the door.

Grigory has the forethought to spring out of my line of fire, but his eyes skewer me just before I leave. “Uri... she’s in a delicate stage of her pregnancy. Confronting her now might not be the best idea.”

Confronting her? Is that what I’m about to do?

I shove Grigory aside and leave the room. Yeah, that’s *exactly* what I’m about to fucking do. She may be in a delicate situation—but she’s one who put herself there. And now, she’s going to deal with the consequences.

She’s going to face me.

The little thief is going to give me some answers.

ALYSSA

I may be seven months pregnant with twins.

I may feel bloated and tired and entirely too heavy.

But in this dress, I also feel like a bride.

Nice as this private hospital room is, there's no full-length mirror, so there's a chance I'm just deluding myself. But I do *feel* good. This is the first time in weeks that I've actually felt somewhat like myself.

But that might also have something to do with the phone call I made to my parents a few minutes ago.

The conversation lasted twenty-seven minutes and thirty-three seconds, according to my call log. I'd started with an apology and segued into an explanation. I told them that I was pregnant and that I was getting married.

They were shocked. Then hurt. Then baffled. But they did their best to be understanding. And in their acceptance of all my mistakes, I suppose I found the courage and the grace to be accepting of theirs.

"I just never understood why you didn't fight her harder. Everyone just sort of accepted the fact that she was going to quit treatment. It felt like you gave up on her."

Mom's voice had gone wobbly as she replied, "Oh, honey, we didn't give up on her. We just realized that fighting her would have robbed us of what little time we did have with her. We decided it was more important to make her happy in her final days than to make ourselves feel better about the situation."

Then Dad had taken the phone and turned the camera on himself. “She did go back to treatment because you asked her to. Because she loved you that much. And in the end...”

“I know. She died anyway. And she died the way she was trying to avoid—in a hospital room, hooked to a bunch of monitors, drugged up, and completely out of it.” I cried for a bit after that and when I’d finally stopped, I managed to say, “That was my fault. I did that to her.”

“You loved her,” Mom whispered.

“We loved her, too,” Dad said. “We just loved her differently. Sometimes, it felt like you punished us for that.”

He wasn’t completely right. But he wasn’t completely wrong, either. When I apologized, they did, too. They apologized for not being there for me the way they should have been right after Ziva’s death.

“You wanted space,” Mom said. “But we should never have given it to you. I guess I figured you’d come back to us eventually on your own. But that never happened.”

“Until now,” Dad added.

They were on a cruise ship somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean. But they promised that once they were back in a couple of weeks, they’d come and see me. I didn’t tell them about the risk of the pregnancy, though. I just told them that I’d be happy to see them when they were home.

When we finally hung up, I cried some more while Elle held me and Polly hovered around, offering me tissues every minute.

“Are you okay?” Elle had asked when I’d finally quieted down.

“Y-yes, I think so.”

“I wish I could say the same for your makeup,” Polly sighed.

I laughed and that just turned into more crying. Polly grabbed my hand in the end and asked if she could get Uri. “Maybe talking to him will help?”

“No!” Elle had exclaimed. “It’s bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding.”

I’d just grinned through my tears. “Honestly, we’ve had our fair share of bad luck so far. I think we’ve reached our quota.” Then I’d turned to Polly. “Actually, would you mind getting him for me? I want to see him.”

Because the truth is, he has become what Ziva was to me: my strength, my support, the person I could lean on for anything.

Except that it’s been a few minutes since Polly left to fetch him and still there’s been no sign of either one of them.

“Should I go look?” Elle asks.

I shake my head. “They’ll be here, don’t worry. Can you pass me the mirror, please?”

She hands it over and I take a look at my restored appearance. Elle helped me redo my makeup after the crying spell had passed. Now, I look like a bride again, albeit a tired one. All I need is to see my groom and I’ll summon up the strength to walk down that aisle and meet my new future with a smile.

I wish Ziva was here. But the sadness I associated with her absence doesn’t sting anymore. It feels a lot like healing.

The door opens and Polly walks in. I wait for Uri to appear behind her but she’s alone.

“Polly?”

She looks off. Paler than usual, chewing at her lip nonstop. “Sorry, Lys. He was right behind me but then Dr. Grigory interrupted us.”

“Oh.” That familiar, fearful pulse picks up in my temples. “Do you know why?”

“He just said that he needed to talk to Uri urgently. And in private.”

Elle and I exchange a glance. “What do you think that’s about?” she asks nervously.

I shrug. “It’s probably something unrelated. I mean, if it was about the babies, I’d be a part of the conversation, too, right?”

This time, it's Polly and Elle who exchange a glance. I shudder inwardly. Is this about Dr. Grigory trying to convince Uri to convince me to deliver the babies immediately? Because if it is, I'm willing to go to battle once again to defend what I know is the right choice.

Polly clears her throat and sits down on the chair next to my bed. "You look nice."

"Thanks," I say with a tight smile. "How does the chapel look?"

"Oh, you're gonna love it. It looks so—"

BOOM!

I put my hands on my belly protectively as the door bangs open and Uri appears. All three of us turn to him with wide eyes.

"Dammit, Uri!" Polly snaps. "What the hell?"

He doesn't bother replying. His eyes are trained on me and the darkness in them is chilling. *Something has gone very wrong.* He's looking at me the way he used to look at me. He's looking at me as though I'm a stranger. A devil. A thief dangling on his fence.

He snaps his fingers at Polly and Elle. "Get out," he snarls. "Now. I need to speak to Alyssa."

Elle turns to me, trepidation written all over her face. "Alyssa —"

"Go, Elle," I say firmly. "It's fine."

She hesitates for a moment but Polly grabs her hand and tows her out of the room. Uri is pacing in front of my bed but the moment we're alone, he stops. He glances up at me like it hurts him to even look in my direction.

"Uri, you're scaring me," I say with a hitch in my voice. "What's going on?"

"How about you tell *me*?" he hisses.

"How can I tell you anything when I have no idea what the hell is happening? Polly said Dr. Grigory pulled you away to

tell you something? What did he tell you?"

"The truth."

Every word he throws at me feels like it has a serrated edge.

"The truth?" I repeat helplessly. "Which is what?"

"It's what I want from you right now."

"Uri—"

"Who is the father of those babies?"

My mouth snaps shut. It takes a while for me to process what he's asking. Because surely he can't be talking about *my* babies right? He can't be talking about the babies I'm carrying right now?

"*What* babies?"

His eyes flash with anger. "Jesus Christ." He points to my stomach. "Those ones."

Where's all the softness, the protectiveness, the affection that's always accompanied any mention of our children? He's talking to me like he doesn't know me. He's talking about our children like they're not his.

"Uri, I don't know what Dr. Grigory said but—"

"He ran tests on you," he snaps. "To check the babies' blood types."

"I—yes, yes he did."

He nods furiously. "The results came back from those tests. Those babies aren't mine. They. Aren't. *Mine.*"

I gape at him silently for a moment. Then a bubble of laughter flies out between my lips. This has to be some sort of sick joke, right?

"Why the fuck are you laughing?"

The laughter dies on my tongue. "Oh my God," I breathe as my eyes go wide. "You actually believe him?"

His scowl makes me shiver. At the same time, a sharp sting of pain races up my belly and then drags down through my spine like nails on a chalkboard.

“The test results were conclusive, Alyssa,” he snarls. “Undeniable. Which leaves only one question: how long have you been fucking my brother?”

Now, in addition to my body, my head is aching, too. “Uri, I have *no* idea what you’re talking about.” Thank God I’m still seated, because if I wasn’t, I’d be in danger of falling and hurting the babies.

“Stop bullshitting me, Alyssa. The truth’s out. I always suspected it.”

“Suspected *what?*” I demand. “Me and Nikolai? Are you insane?!”

“So you’re denying it?”

“Of course I’m denying it! It’s not true. You’re the only man I’ve been with in—hell, in *years*. There’s been no one else!”

He’s not hearing a word of what I’m saying, though. “Was that what you and Nikolai were giggling about every time I entered the room?” His face is as forceful and as unforgiving as thunder. All I want to do is shrink from his murderous gaze. “Laughing at the oblivious cuckold who was foolish enough to trust the two of you.”

I drop my head to hide my unwanted tears. “Please listen to me, Uri,” I beg. “You need to calm down.”

What I really mean is *I* need to calm down. The whole damn situation needs to calm down. Otherwise, I’m fairly certain my anxiety is going to kick into high gear and push me right into the emergency C-section I’m desperate to avoid.

“Calm down?” he growls, stomping over to me. I want to cry out, *No! Please!* But the words don’t even leave my lips before his hand bands around my throat. There’s no real pressure; he’s not hurting me. But the gesture is. The emotion behind it is. “How can I calm down when you’ve been fucking my brother behind my back from the beginning?”

I try to shake my head, but his hand keeps me from moving. “It’s not true,” I manage to whisper shakily. “Ask Nikolai.”

His lips tighten into a thin line. His eyes go dark and he releases me. “Oh, believe me—that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

I wince as a fresh wave of pain shoots through my body. But he’s so angry he doesn’t even notice.

Or maybe he just doesn’t care anymore.

“Then go!” I shout as the panic starts to take over. “Throw your tantrum somewhere else because I’m done talking to you.” I lift my eyes to his. “These babies are *yours*. And if you choose not to believe me, then I’m not interested in being anywhere near you. Now, leave, before I have you kicked out.”

His eyes go wide but the fury doesn’t leave them. He turns and stalks out of the room and I brace myself for the second slam.

Except it never comes. Because before the door slams shut, Elle and Polly rush inside, both wearing identical masks of worry and confusion.

“What’s going on?” Elle asks.

Polly grabs my hand. “Are you okay?”

I shake my head, trying to breathe through the pain and fear. My chest feels heavy. So does my stomach. “Get this dress off me,” I gasp. “Get it *off!*”

I start clawing at the corset ties as Elle tries to grab my hands. “Hey, Lys, it’s okay. Calm down. It’s gonna be okay.”

How can I explain to her that she’s wrong? I was standing on solid ground a few minutes ago. Now, quicksand is pulling me under.

“I can’t breathe,” I choke desperately. “I can’t *breathe*.”

ALYSSA

Riiiiiiip.

The dress tears right down the side. I can't even bring myself to mourn its loss as I shred it off me. I don't want the fabric so much as touching my skin. I want it *gone*.

I'm such an idiot. What was I thinking? A pretty ceremony? A shotgun wedding? My dream husband? They were all just silly little figments of my imagination. A stupid fairytale I was clinging to because I was alone and I was scared.

Who the hell did I think I was to deserve a happy ending?

"Get it off!"

"Okay, okay!" Elle cries, pulling the last scrap of the dress from my body. "It's off. See?" She holds up the fine silk and then throws it onto the chair next to my bed. "Take a deep breath."

"I'm trying," I pant, turning my back on both Polly and Elle and burying my face in my hands. "I swear I'm trying."

I can't stand the way they're looking at me. Like I'm some sort of broken charity case. No. Worse. A jilted lover.

Uri as good as left me at the altar. *Pregnant*, no less.

I'd been riding high after that conversation with my parents. It felt like a true fresh start. When I hung up, I could tell myself with a straight face that I was finally growing up, putting my past behind me, moving on with life. It felt like I was well on my way to healing.

And now?

Not one bit of that is true.

How fragile we are. How easily broken. The difference between happiness and despair is as simple and as instant as a phone call. A diagnosis. A few angry words and a pair of smoldering blue eyes.

“Hey,” Elle says, approaching me from the side as though I’m a trapped animal she’s afraid of spooking. “You’re shivering, hon. Let’s get you covered up, okay?”

I look down to discover that she’s right. My skin is pimpled with goosebumps and my hair’s standing on end. But it has nothing to do with the temperature in the room.

Still, I don’t stop her when she ventures closer with my sweats in one hand and a t-shirt in the other. She and Polly help me shrug my clothes on and when they’re done, it feels like an hour has passed. Maybe more. I glance towards my torn wedding dress and bite down on my tongue until I taste blood.

“Sit down, hon,” Elle says gently. “Please. You look dead on your feet.”

Fitting. I feel pretty dead inside, too.

All she has to do is nudge me and I fall back into the bed. I say nothing as she drags a blanket over me. “Alyssa, say something. You look...”

She trails off and that final unsaid word hangs in the space between us. *Horrible? Sad? Lost? Hopeless? Pathetic?* It doesn’t even matter; they all apply. Dealer’s choice, really.

“Lys.” Polly’s voice is soft as she moves to the side of my bed and takes my hand. “I don’t know what’s going on with Uri, but it has to be a misunderstanding. It just *has* to.”

I shake my head. My eyes float to hers but I’m not really looking at anything, or if I am, my brain isn’t bothering to decipher it. I just see shapes with fuzzy outlines. Planes of indistinct color that add up to something vaguely Polly-shaped. “He doesn’t trust me.”

“Well, that’s bullshit!” Polly says with all that teenage angst that I sometimes think I still haven’t outgrown. “I’m gonna go talk to him.”

“Don’t,” I protest weakly, but Polly’s already storming off towards the door.

“Pol—”

“She’s already gone,” Elle says, grabbing my hand. “Alyssa, what *happened*?”

I try to focus on Elle but it’s more of the same. It’s not my friend looking at me. Just a cacophony of meaningless, flesh-colored prisms. “I don’t know.”

She’s blinking a lot and fidgeting a lot, so I know that she’s worried. “Alyssa, hon, you’re not looking so good.”

I wish I had the energy to smile. “I feel... weird.”

“Are you having pain?”

So much pain. But that’s all in my heart, and I’m pretty sure she’s talking about my pregnancy. The babies. I try to concentrate on my physical body but there’s a weird disconnect happening that I’ve never experienced before. When I concentrate really hard, I feel faint traces of that familiar stabbing in my stomach and at my spine.

I wince and Elle’s eyes go wide. “Okay, that’s it—I’m gonna go and get a nurse.”

Before I can argue, she does the same as Pol did and disappears, racing out of the room as though I’m in imminent danger. It certainly feels that way, but as far as medicine goes, I’m not sure a broken heart qualifies.

The longer I lie there, the sharper the pain becomes. And by the time Grigory runs in with a nurse in tow, I’m actually relieved. The nurse isn’t familiar. She’s got dark brown eyes and jet black hair. She’s also got a nose ring that I would have appreciated a lot more if it hadn’t been for the stabbing pain that’s starting to push in on either side of my stomach.

“Alyssa, are you okay? What’s going on?”

I wince, the pain taking my voice hostage. Luckily, Elle is there, ready to speak for me. “She... Um, Uri was here a few minutes ago. I think they had a fight. She had a little freakout —” *Did I? Is that what we’re calling it?* “—and then she just got really pale and quiet. Something’s not right.”

“Okay,” Dr. Grigory says, all business. “Let’s check her vitals. We might be seeing the first signs of fetal distress.”

No.

I so desperately wanted to give both my babies their best chance of survival. Add that to the long list of things I’ve failed at before I’ve even started.

Marriage.

Pregnancy.

Motherhood.

Failure, failure, failure.

Elle grabs my hand and keeps a tight hold on it as Dr. Grigory and his nurse hook me up to machines, measure this, check on that. It seems to go on forever. And then—

Dr. Grigory turns to me. How have I not noticed how sandy his eyes are before now? *Quicksand eyes, dragging me down...* “Okay, we’re going to need to perform an emergency C-section. These babies need to be delivered immediately.” He turns to his nurse. “Prep her for surgery.”

Elle looks between me and the doctor helpless. “No. Wait! The father—”

The door to my room bursts open and a few more nurses come in, pushing a gurney between them.

“The father’s not coming, Elle,” I say so softly that it’s a wonder she can hear me at all. “Uri’s not interested. I’m on my own with this one.”

Elle’s face ripples with determination. “No, you’re not. I’m going to be with you. I won’t leave your side.”

“I’m afraid you’re going to have to,” Dr. Grigory says gently. “No one is allowed in the operating room except medical

staff.”

“Can’t you make an exception?” Elle demands. “She needs me.”

“I’m afraid not,” Dr. Grigory insists as I’m transferred onto a gurney.

“But—”

I grab Elle’s hand and squeeze as tightly as I can. “It’s okay,” I tell her. “I’ll be okay. I can do this.”

She doesn’t look confident. She looks ghost-white and fidgety. “Alyssa—”

“This is for my babies,” I choke out despite how much energy it’s costing me to speak. “I can do this... for them.”

A tear slips down her cheek. “W-what about Uri?”

I know what she’s asking and the simple truth is, I don’t know. I don’t know if telling him I need him is the right thing—or if telling him to fuck off forever is better. I’m too emotional and in too much pain to decide what I really want or why I really want it. And that’s assuming the universe even gives a damn about whether or not I want what’s coming. It might just force it on me anyway.

I keep my eyes on her. “I’ll be fine,” I promise as they wheel me out of the room.

My head lolls back against the pillow and I keep my eyes on the moving ceiling. No, wait. The ceiling isn’t moving; *I’m* moving. I can hear beeping in the distance, voices raised in urgency, the tangy smell of Lysol and dirty mop water.

It’s the same smell that invaded my nostrils every time I stepped into the hospital with Ziva. I still remember her leaning over to me with a secretive, ghoulish smile and whispering in my ear, *It’s the only way to cover up the smell of me rotting from the inside out.*

No.

I refuse to think about death anymore. There’s going to be no more death, no more loss. I may be months early but my

babies will survive. I'm going to keep them both alive with the sheer strength of my will.

I couldn't save Ziva.

But I'm gonna save them.

The doors slam open behind me and I feel as though I'm being attacked by light. *Why the hell is it so bright?*

And cold?

By the time my eyes adjust, I realize I'm being wheeled onto something. I look around in panic, trying to find a familiar face.

"W-where's Dr. Grigory?" I ask.

"He's riding in the front."

I turn to the nurse who just spoke. She's the one I noticed earlier, the one with dark eyes and jet black hair and the nose ring. "R-riding in the front?" I ask in confusion. "I-I thought you were taking me to the operating room? My babies..."

"Oh, don't worry," she replies with a smile that's decidedly un-nurse-like. "Your babies are okay. And you're not going into labor. Not yet anyway."

My heartbeat feels like it's marching to the beat of a dirge. Slow, thudding, confused. I try to get up but the black-haired nurse pushes me down roughly and grabs my right hand. She binds it to the gurney with a leather strap while another nurse does the same thing with my left hand.

Though "nurse" might not be the right term for these people, I'm just now realizing.

"What's going on?" I demand weakly. "Where are you taking me?"

The black-haired not-a-nurse gives me a leering wink that makes my stomach flip. "I wanna tell you we're taking you someplace safe, but... that would be a lie."

She punches her palm against the ceiling of whatever vehicle we're in and just like that, we start rolling away from the hospital.

Away from Uri.

Away from safety.

Off to God knows where.

URI

I burst through the chapel doors, trying to channel all my rage and hurt into something purposeful.

Like killing my fucking brother.

He's standing just a few feet from the cake that I was supposed to cut with my new bride, chatting it up with the officiant who was supposed to marry us. He's laughing about something, his face creasing with smile lines.

Dimiv is standing off in the corner with Lev, who's still tuning out the world with his noise-canceling headphones. There's no one else in the chapel. But even if there was, I wouldn't care. An audience isn't going to stop me from what's about to happen.

"Uri?" Nikolai says, breaking off his conversation with the officiant. "We were wondering where..."

He trails off when he sees the look on my face. I start striding forward. An executioner's walk. The officiant is smart enough to back away as I approach.

Nikolai's brow furrows. His laugh lines disappear and are replaced with furrows of fear across his forehead. "Uri...?"

I slam my fist into his face before he can get out another word. One hit and he's on the floor, blood pouring from his nose. He touches the blood on his face with disbelief and looks up at me. "What the *fuck*?"

"You bastard," I hiss as I continue my assault on him.

He backs away, refusing to fight back. Even when he manages to get back on his feet, he blocks me instead of returning fire. “For God’s sake, Uri,” he pants. “Stop!”

But I don’t stop. I’m not above finishing a one-sided fight. At least not while this black rage has its hold on me. I grab Niko by his lapels and start sinking my fist into his stomach again and again. In the corner of my eye, I see the officiant flee the chapel in pure terror, his priest’s garb flapping in the wind.

“*Enough!*”

It’s not Nikolai who spoke this time; it’s Polina. Only at the sound of her voice do I let go.

Nikolai spits out more blood and the fragment of a tooth as Polly jumps in between the two of us. “I can’t believe you just did that!” she shrieks, turning accusing eyes on me. “Why are you being such an *asshole?*”

I’ve never seen Polly look so angry. Or, worse, so disappointed. It sobers me up enough that I’m willing to unfurl my fists.

But not enough to make me forget how my own brother betrayed me.

Nikolai glares at me, fresh red blood coating the bottom half of his face. “What the hell is your problem?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “You think you can fuck my fiancée, get her pregnant, and then *lie* to me about it?”

Nikolai’s jaw drops. I can’t even take in Polly or Dimiv’s reactions because my eyes are trained on him.

“Don’t lie to me, Nikolai. I *know*. I know the truth now.”

“Jesus,” he gasps. “You’re serious.”

“I just found out.”

“From *who?*” he demands incredulously. The flinging of his hands sends blood droplets spraying all across the room. The white roses shudder as crimson blood rains down on them. “Because whoever told you that shit is a *liar.*”

There's so much outrage, so much shock, so much indignation in his eyes and in his voice that it plants just the tiniest seed of doubt in my head. Looking at him now, it seems impossible. This is *Nikolai*. We may have done battle a few times in the past, but we are brothers. It's part of the deal.

And yet... I think about all those fights I won because I was the *pahkan*. I think about all the times Nikolai was forced to bite his tongue because *I* was the head of the family. Because *my* head bore the crown. I think about how, when shit hit the fan and someone needed to take the reins, he was pushed to the side while I took over.

"Is this payback?" I scowl.

Nikolai's eyes go wide. "Payback for *what*?"

"Let's just get all this shit out in the open, shall we? It's been almost eight years and we've never had a real conversation about it. You are the elder brother, but I ended up the *pahkan* and you have always resented me for it."

His eyes flare again. "Wait. Hold on. Let me get this straight. You believe that I slept with your woman as payback for taking *pakhan* from me?"

Polly opens her mouth to say something but Dimiv grabs her arm and shakes his head. She falls silent while Nikolai grabs one of the cloth napkins off the cake table and grimly wipes away some of the blood on his face.

It smears it around more than it cleans anything. But that's life these days—we try to clean it, to make things work, and shit just gets messier and messier and bloodier and bloodier. It's a bit too on the nose, as far as metaphors go, actually.

He drops the napkin in disgust and turns his gaze back on me. "You want to have this conversation now, like this? *Fine*. There was a time when I was angry and bitter about it. But the moment I took my ego out of it, I was able to see that you were the right choice for *pahkan* and I wasn't. I could have challenged you; I could have called for a vote. I did neither. I let you take control because you were more suited for the role than I was." He spits out more blood and screws his face up in

a scowl. “When we lost Mother and Otets, I broke down and you stepped up. Yeah, I *was* bitter and I *was* angry. But I was angry at *myself*.”

His explanation is coming off a lot more sincere than I’d have expected for the kind of man capable of fucking his brother’s woman. And that small kernel of doubt at the back of my head is starting to grow. It’s taking root, throwing up vines that wind their way through me.

“Make no mistake,” Nikolai continues angrily. “I think you’re a pompous, arrogant smart ass who doesn’t listen to or value anyone else’s opinions most of the time. But I do think you’re the perfect *pahkan* for this Bratva. And I would never dream of challenging you for the mantle or begrudging you for taking it.”

I stand in silence. In the corner of my eye, one of the white roses droops low, weighed down by my brother’s blood.

He takes a step forward and jabs his finger in my chest. “So *no*, I did not sleep with Alyssa. Nor would I ever do something like that. We are just *friends*. It’s what we’ve always been and that’s not going to change. Unless you decide to be an asshole about whatever chip has landed on your shoulder today.”

Dimiv takes a step forward. “Cousin,” he intercedes gently, “what put this idea in your head?”

My eyes veer to him. “Grigory told me.”

Nikolai balks. “*Grigory* told you that I was the father of Alyssa’s babies?!”

“He told me that the DNA and blood tests they took for the babies suggests that I’m not their father, but their father is closely related.”

Nikolai’s eyes swing over to Dimiv. “I don’t understand... Grigory’s been working for the Bugrov Bratva for decades. Why would he lie about something like that?”

The doubt is spreading like a weed now. Those vines reach and poke and prod into every vulnerable part of my brain. If Nikolai is right and Grigory is lying...

“Fuck. Alyssa,” I mutter as I fly out of the chapel.

I’m racing down the hallway towards Alyssa’s room when I spot Elle coming down the corridor from the other end. *If she’s here... who’s with Alyssa?*

She comes to a standstill when she sees me. Then her eyes narrow into furious slits. “What the hell is wrong with you?” she seethes. “You stress your girlfriend into labor and then you disappear on her when she needs you the most?”

Polly, Dimiv, and Nikolai plow in right behind me. Pol snatches up Elle’s arm. “She’s in labor?”

“They wheeled her away like ten minutes ago!” Elle exclaims. She pauses slightly when her eyes land on Nikolai’s bloody face. “I-I asked if I could go in with her but the doctor refused to let me.”

“Which doctor?”

She frowns. “What do you mean, ‘which doctor’? *Your* doctor! Alyssa’s doctor. Gregory whatchamacallit.”

“*Fuck*,” I snarl, running a hand through my hair. “Fuck. Which way did they take her?”

Her frown gets deeper. “That way, I think,” she says, pointing to a nearby set of double doors. “She was in pain. They were taking her to one of the operating rooms to deliver the twins.”

I don’t hesitate. I run straight through those doors, ignoring the sign that reads *Access for Medical Staff Only* and anyone who dares to ask me what I’m doing here. I’m about to bust right into every last room I can find when I see a doctor emerging from one of them, decked in pale blue scrubs.

I grab her by the shoulders. “My fiancée is delivering right now. Emergency C-section. I need to find her.”

“Sir, you’re not supposed to—”

“*Now*,” I growl.

Something about my tone must get through to her, because she sighs and her lips purse in distaste. “If you can go back to the waiting room, I’ll find out where she is and—”

“I’m not leaving here until I know where she is. So you can either help me now or I’m going to bust into every single goddamn room until I find her. Dr. Grigory Tasarov is the one delivering the babies.”

The doctor’s eyes bulge. “Follow me.” She takes me to the nurses’ station and asks the woman behind the counter to check all the surgeries taking place right now and with which doctors. Then she leans over the nurse’s shoulder and reads the screen. When she straightens, her lips are pursing even tighter. A thin slash of grim dismay. “Dr. Tasarov is not currently using any of the operating rooms. In fact, there are no emergency C-sections taking place right now.”

“You’re sure?”

She nods. “A hundred percent.”

“Then I need his pager number. Now.”

The doctor frowns. “I’m sorry, but I can only release that information to hospital staff. I can give you his cell phone—”

“No,” I growl, my desperation mounting higher and higher. “He’ll have turned his phone off. Or destroyed it. I need his pager number so that I can track it.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but—”

I lean forward over the counter. “He has my *wife*,” I snarl. “He has abducted her and my unborn babies. And if you don’t give me his pager number right fucking now, the lawsuit I’ll drop on your head will be the very least of the problems I will bring to your doorstep.”

The doctor’s face ripples with worry as she glances down at the nurse manning the desk. At least the nurse has the sense to nod in encouragement. The doctor sighs. She grabs a piece of paper, scribbles down the pager number for me, and forks it over.

“You didn’t get this number from me.”

I snatch it from her grasp. “Thank you.” Then I twist around and rush back outside where Nikolai and Dimiv are waiting for me right outside the doors.

“Well?” Nikolai asks.

Polly and Elle appear from the side. They’re holding hands. Polly’s face is drained of color and Elle is bouncing from one leg to the other frantically like the ground is molten.

“It was Grigory,” I hiss. “He lied.”

Dimiv raises his eyebrows. “Why would he do that?”

“To cause a rift. To isolate Alyssa. To get her out of this hospital and away from my protection.”

The three of us look at each other as the puzzle pieces start falling into place. Grigory is only a pawn. The real mastermind behind this is out there, roaming free. All of us say the same word in unison, the only possible explanation.

“Sobakin.”

ALYSSA

I'm not sure when I fell asleep, but I really have to wake up. Ziva needs me.

She's been vomiting all night. Her hair's started to fall out in clumps and her mood has been manic. It doesn't help that Mom's still in denial about her diagnosis and Dad keeps insisting on forcing her to see new specialists again and again and again.

I'm the only one who understands what she needs: she needs to be treated like a *person*. Not a patient. *A person*.

Alyssa, where are you?

I'm here! I try to call out to her, but I can't seem to find my voice. I can't seem to open my eyes, either.

What even is this? What's happening?

It's my worst nightmare, is what it is. Catatonic when my loved ones need me most. I don't have many of those left, "loved ones." My whole world has narrowed down to two. Ziva and Elle.

Elle got early acceptance at Wellesley, so she's going to be leaving soon. And Ziva... she's sick.

Not the kind of sick that you can walk off. Not the kind of sick that you can sleep off. The kind of sick that's with you when you walk and talk and breathe. The kind of sick that picks up steam the longer it sits in your body. It spreads roots and you can't rip it out no matter how hard you try.

I'm here, Ziva. I'm never gonna leave you. And I'm not going to let you die.

I've made that promise to her countless times already. The last time I said it, she told me to stop making promises I couldn't keep.

This isn't up to you, Lys. It's not up to anyone.

But she doesn't get it. It *is* up to the people around you to hold you upright when you don't have the strength anymore. Isn't that the whole point of family? And without Ziva, I don't have a family at all.

Come on, I will myself. Get up. Get the fuck up. Ziva needs you!

There's a strange beeping in my left ear. It's sending a prickly feeling up my left arm. Is someone touching me? Is Ziva here and I just haven't been able to open my eyes long enough to notice?

Ziva?

No. It can't be Ziva. She's not usually so rough. And it doesn't hurt so much when she's around me. Why does it hurt? There are sharp stings racing down my spine. And my stomach. And now my arm.

What is that?

"Her vitals are stable," a deep voice reports without emotion. "The babies' heart rates have normalized too. We can leave them in there."

Another voice snakes through my subconscious. Eerily familiar and yet alien enough to make my skin crawl. "Why would we want to? Doesn't serve my purpose. Call me when you're ready to induce."

Then I hear footsteps receding.

"Vitals"? "Babies"? "Induce"?

Something is very wrong. If I can just open my eyes, maybe things will become clearer. I try to reach for Ziva but the moment I manage to get my eyes open, her likeness

disintegrates. Instead, I'm staring at a man in a doctor's coat. Gray stubble, patchy across the back of his head.

I know him.

"D-Dr. Grigory?"

He turns from the monitor that I'm hooked up to. There's a dullness in his eyes, like he's so tired he can barely keep his eyelids from fluttering closed. "Hello, Alyssa."

I draw in a breath that hurts my chest. I should have stayed under, in that half-dream world. The reality is hitting hard now and it's leaving me panicked. Scared. Helpless.

"W-where am I?"

It looks like a hospital room at first blush, but the closer I peer around, the more I see that it's more like a cheap facade. The paint on the walls is peeling, the tiles on the floor are cracking. A beady red light belonging to a security camera in the far corner stares at me unblinking.

"What's going on?" I croak when he doesn't answer my first question.

"I'm sorry," he whispers with resignation. "I had to comply."

"I... I don't know what that means."

I try to remember how I went from the hospital to this grimy fake replica. Then it hits me.

The fight with Uri. My anxiety kicking into high gear, the pain racing through me as Elle had run for the doctors. The nurses came pouring in with Dr. Grigory at the forefront. His eyes—*quicksand eyes*. The black hair of the false nurse. Her wink.

Oh, God.

"Dr. Grigory, talk to me!"

"Shh," he snaps. "Lower your voice or he'll come back in here!"

I wince. "Who? Who will come back in here?" The other voice I heard earlier? The eerie but familiar voice. *No. No. No.*

It can't be. “Please, you have to help me. You have to get me out of here!”

Grigory's dead eyes veer towards me for a moment. “I'm afraid my hands are tied.”

I dart a glance over at the monitors reporting my vitals. He mentioned earlier that mine were stable. That the babies' heartbeats were good, too.

“I wasn't in labor earlier, was I?”

“Your heart rate was elevated. So was your blood pressure. But no, you weren't in labor.”

“The babies?”

“Both are fine.” He exhales in exhaustion as he turns back to the screens.

“I heard what that nurse said before,” I murmur as fat tears start leaking down the side of my face. “My babies aren't ready to come out. It's too early. I'm not ready to be induced.”

His deadpan expression doesn't change as he repeats what he said before. “I'm afraid my hands are tied.”

I shake my head as my blood pressure spikes again. The *EEK-EEK-EEK!* of the chirping monitor is enough to drive me insane. “What is wrong with you? You took an oath to preserve and protect. If you deliver my babies now, they could die!”

He turns to me. Quicksand eyes, dragging me and him both down, down, down. It's like he's looking right through me. “I hate to say it, Alyssa, but your babies are as good as dead anyway.”

Breathing is borderline impossible. When Dr. Grigory walks away, I don't even bother stopping him. What's the point? He's not here for me. Or for my babies.

I'm on my own.

Again.



I've been alone in this room for a while before I hear footsteps again. I'm expecting Grigory, but it's someone else that walks through the door. I can't say I'm surprised; I've had the last hour or so to ruminate on all the different possibilities that landed me here. And only one name kept coming up over and over again.

"Boris."

"Comfortable?" the man asks with a distracted leer.

"Is that a trick question?"

He smirks. "I must say, even pale and pregnant, you're very attractive."

"Fuck you."

He chuckles and combs two fingers through his salt-and-pepper mustache. "Still feisty, too. I like that in a woman."

"What are you planning on doing with me?"

He lowers himself down onto my bed. I cringe away so no part of me is in danger of coming in contact with him. "If you'd really like to know... I'm planning on waiting until you give birth, gutting your babies in front of Uri, and then killing you right after them."

Bile rises to my throat at the mere thought. "What kind of man are you?"

He leans in so close that I can smell the stale tuna and strong vodka on his breath. "The kind of man who doesn't forget a slight. I'm going to make sure Uri Bugrov knows exactly who he's dealing with."

"You're going to kill me? You're going to kill two defenseless newborn babies in the name of *revenge*?"

He smiles darkly. "That's exactly what I plan on doing."

"You're a monster."

He straightens up off the bed and twists around to face me. "Don't worry: I'll kill the babies fast. But you..." He moves forward and tries to touch my cheek. I jerk away from him violently and he pulls back with a laugh. "—you, I'm gonna

have to go slow. Make sure you're just on the cusp of death when he finds you."

"He'll kill you for this!" I scream at Boris's back. "He will fucking *kill* you, you sick bastard!"

Boris just laughs louder. "Oh, he'll be dead long before he ever gets the chance."

He slams the door in my face and I'm left lying in place, shaking with fear and panic. "D-don't worry," I stammer desperately as my hands drift to my stomach, wrists still raw and burning from where they cuffed me to the gurney. "I'll keep you safe. I'll keep you both safe."

It's not Ziva that needs me. It's my children.

But just like before, just like with my sister...

I'm making promises I can't keep.

ALYSSA

Three words wake me up sometime later from that not-quite-sleeping daze I'm living in. "Ready the Pitocin."

I can't even fight back because my arms and legs are in restraints once again, lashing me to the bed like I'm a patient in a psych ward.

"What's that?" I cry out as the black-haired nurse pulls out an injection syringe. "What's that...? Stop... You can't do this... please..."

She gives me a cruel smile accompanied by another of those winks that feel even crueler. "This'll go a lot easier if you stop struggling. Otherwise—" She holds up the big needle and squeezes a little so that a few drops of liquid spurt out. "—it might hurt."

"No, no, no..." My eyes fly to the asshole doctor I used to trust. "Dr. Grigory, *please*. Don't do this! Don't induce. My babies aren't ready to come out yet."

He doesn't answer. Doesn't so much as glance my way as he heads for the door. "Let me know when the contractions start," he mumbles in a barely audible monotone.

The door slams on him. "Stop!" I scream wildly. "You fucking asshole!" The black-haired bitch grabs my arm. "No! No! I won't let you... get the fuck—ah!"

She punctures one of the veins on my arm with the needle and I can only watch in horror as she depresses the plunger and the liquid drains into my blood. When she pulls out the syringe, a

spot of blood appears. Just one tiny spot of red blood, beaded up on the white skin of my arm. It looks so innocent. So feeble.

Then the pain hits.

My spine arches as white-hot heat surges through every nerve ending. I feel like I'm being burned alive from the inside out. All I can do is thrash against my restraints and wail.

The nurse looks on, unmoved.

"Hush now," she scolds. "It doesn't hurt that bad." She starts to leave, but when her wrist passes close to where I can reach, I try to fumble for it.

"Please," I beg, clutching her clammy fingers desperately. "I can help you. I-if you just help me now, I'll help you in return."

She looks amused now, eyebrows arched like I told a funny joke. "Really? And how are you gonna do that?"

"I can get you out of this place, away from these people. You won't ever be forced to do anything you don't want to do ever again. I can get you whatever you want. A job, a place to live, a new identity if that's what you need... *anything*."

She purses his lips and kneels down so she's eye-level with me, her nose ring catching the light. Her clammy fingers are intertwined with my own now and when she starts to speak, it takes me a second to realize that the tenderness in her voice doesn't match the violence of her words at all. "Sweetheart... when you say *you* can get me these things, you're not really talking about yourself, are you?"

I gawk, mouth open, but I can't respond. Something's coming. Something's happening to my body. I feel like my insides are cracking open.

Is that a contraction? Or are they killing me slowly?

"D-does it matter?"

She smirks and grazes my cheek with soft fingers. "I'm afraid it does. Your power comes from a powerful friend in your corner." Those fingers harden and she starts to squeeze the hell

out of my face, smushing it into a grotesque mask. “Well, I already have a powerful friend in my corner. And he wants us to rip you open and take out the two little rats in your belly.” Letting go of my face, she rises up to her full height. From this angle, she looks inhuman. Completely alien and remorseless.

My stomach cramps tight. I scream.

The black-haired nurse casts an eye over to the monitors and smiles thinly. “Won’t be long now,” she says to me. She turns to someone I can’t see and adds, “Tell them that the contractions have started.”

“*No!* Fuck you, you fucking *bitch!*”

“Wow,” she remarks, sneering at me. “The girl scout’s got a sailor’s mouth on her. Wonder how long that’ll last when they cut you open.”

“Anjelika!” Grigory’s voice slices through out of nowhere, more forceful than I’ve ever heard it before. “You can go out back. The boss wants to see you.” The nurse shoots me one more scowl before ducking out of the room.

Then the door closes and Grigory turns to me. “Sorry about that. She shouldn’t have been so rough with you.”

“Dr. Grigory,” I plead, still trying to play nice. “*Please*. I’m begging you. If you take my babies out now, they’ll die.”

He sighs. “We’ve been over this, Alyssa. There’s nothing I can do. If I defy Boris, he’ll kill me; he’ll kill my wife and my kids. I have nothing against you. I don’t want to see you suffer. But if it comes down to my family or yours... I’m choosing mine.”

I brace myself as another contraction rips through my body. I can swear I hear bones cracking, organs defeating. By the time it’s done with me, I have fresh tears in my eyes.

Maybe it’s the pain that makes things clear but suddenly, I’m starting to figure everything out. It’s like all the bullshit fades away in the face of the pain and only the true things are left behind. “You’re the one who helped Boris escape,” I whisper, sweating and shivering. “The day he escaped... *you* were at the house giving me an exam.”

He doesn't bother denying it. "Your contractions are getting closer together."

I ignore him. *Tell me something I don't know, asshole.* "And at the hospital, you're the one that told Uri that my babies weren't his."

"I really didn't think that would work. I overestimated how much your man trusts you."

Another contraction hits me like a runaway train. I clamp down because I won't give these monsters the satisfaction of hearing my screams, though I think I fuck up my jaw with how hard it is to keep them swallowed down.

"Don't talk to me about trust," I pant when the wave subsides. "You're an idiot to trust that Boris is going to keep his word and leave you and your family unharmed. The moment he's got me out of the way, he's going to kill you, too."

Grigory shrugs. "I'm useful to him. As long as I continue to be useful to him, he'll keep me alive."

"You really want to live your entire life with that noose around your neck?" He moves wordlessly to my feet and starts undoing my restraints. "What are you doing?"

He starts to transfer my legs into stirrups. I summon as much strength as I can muster and kick him in the chest. The first blow takes him by surprise and he stumbles backward, but I don't have time to get in a second before he seizes my ankle hard with both hands and slams it down into the stirrup.

"You're only making this worse for yourself," he growls, repeating the same process with my other leg.

"What does it even matter?" I cry out. "He's going to kill me and my babies anyway. If I'm gonna go down, I might as well go down fighting."

Those words sound a lot more badass than they feel. As my legs are locked down with tight cuffs, I feel my spirit die a little inside. My babies aren't even born yet and already, I'm failing at motherhood.

Grigory adjusts the stirrups out to each side and my legs part against my will. “I’m going to check for dilation. This might hurt a little.”

“No. Stop. *Stop.*”

He doesn’t stop. He pulls on a glove and inserts his hand between my legs. I wince against the sharp pain as another contraction starts up. They’re coming fast now. Too fast. Too fucking fast.

“You’re at eight centimeters. It’s almost time to start pushing.”

Pushing?

“Y-you’re not cutting me open?”

His eyes meet mine over my swollen stomach. “If we cut you open, we risk losing you on the table. Boris wants you alive for... after.”

I’m not sure why but I’m relieved. Probably because the thought of this group of people cutting me open feels a little bit like being a piece of meat at a butcher’s shop. At least I’ll have the small dignity of delivering my babies myself.

The butchery will come afterward.

“I’m going to give you an epidural for the pain.”

“No!”

He pauses. “No?”

“If I’m going to be forced to have my babies now, I want to remember every single detail. I want to *feel* it. Every single thing.”

Grigory frowns. “An epidural won’t affect your ability to remember this. It will only numb you so that the experience isn’t as painful. Considering what you’ll go through after this, I’d want to avoid as much pain as you can beforehand, if I were you.”

It’s a strange and terrifying warning delivered like run-of-the-mill medical advice, which only makes it all the more chilling. But I shake my head anyway. “No. I want to have my babies naturally. Like I said, I want to feel everything.”

Grigory shrugs. "It's your call."

I collapse back against my pillow. My sweat is soaking through the sheets until they stick to my bare skin. For a while, all I can feel is the rattle of my breath in my lungs. Then, out of nowhere, another contraction starts up with a vengeance.

As my spine arches once more and that splitting-me-apart pain reaches its fever pitch, I keep my mouth sealed shut, even when it's almost impossible not to scream. This might just be the most painful one yet. Surely, whatever Boris has in store for me is nothing compared to this, right?

Somewhere in the midst of it, I hear Grigory whisper out the door, "It's almost time."

"Oh, God," I moan deliriously, staring up at the ceiling. I close my eyes and whisper a prayer.

Please help me. Send Uri to me. This can't be how it ends. Not for me and not for my babies. This can't be the end.

More feet approach. I want to look, but my head is getting heavier and heavier by the minute.

"Jesus!" the black-haired nurse exclaims. "That's a lot of blood. Is that normal?"

"No." Grigory's voice is low and urgent. "No, it's not."

"Well? What do we do?"

"Go get Boris. Something's wrong."

URI

There's a moment of silence on the other line after I give Dominik the location.

"Are you sure?" he asks again. "That's a house in the middle of bumfuck nowhere."

"In a way, it's genius," I point out. "No one will suspect the kind of depraved shit happening in the basements of some of these nice little suburban homes. People see picket fences and think 'wholesome family life.'"

"I can be there in thirty with backup."

"Bring every man you can spare. This is it."

He hangs up and I jump into the passenger seat while Nikolai takes the wheel and Dimiv climbs in the back. We've got half a dozen cars filled with armed men trailing us, but nothing about our current situation reassures me.

I fucked up. There's no way to get past that. I lapped up every last morsel of the bullshit that that bastard, Grigory, fed me. I believed him over Alyssa. I trusted him over my own brother. I left my woman exposed and vulnerable and I beat Nikolai's face into a bloody pulp.

If my father were here, he'd have put my ass into the dirt and I'd deserve it. I glance over my shoulder at Dimiv. "Check in with Stepan. I need to know the moment Lev and Polly are back in the estate."

"On it."

I can't stop thinking about Alyssa and what she must be going through right now. If she or one of those babies is hurt because of this, I'll never forgive myself. I may as well just step down as *pahkan* and hand the mantle over to Nikolai. He deserves it more than I do, anyway.

I glance his way. His driving is fast and decisive, despite the crusted blood gluing his eyes shut and the swollen bruises I can already see forming high on his cheekbones. *I did that to him. I hurt him.*

I'm not my brother's keeper, apparently; I'm my brother's would-be murderer.

Idiot.

Fucking *idiot.*

"It's going to be okay, you know," Nikolai says, tossing me a concerned glance as we whip around a corner. "We'll get there in time."

I wince. He doesn't even sound angry anymore. Somehow, that's so much worse. I'd know what to do with his anger: take it. His sympathy, on the other hand, is a complete mystery. "Nikolai..."

"Don't," he says firmly. "You can apologize to me later. After you've found Alyssa and sorted out your shit with her."

I sigh. "You're a better man than I am."

Nikolai snorts. "Stop feeling sorry for yourself. You've never played the victim before; don't start now."

"Alyssa's in Boris's claws because of me. And our last interaction was a dumb fight that involved me accusing her of cheating on me and trying to pass off another man's babies as mine."

Dimiv curses softly in the back seat but Nikolai just glares at me. "And you're going to get her back and you're gonna do everything in your power to make it up to her."

"And what if I don't get that chance?" I growl. "What if—"

“No,” Nikolai says sharply. “We’re not going there. You hear me? We’re not going there until we have to.”

“Damn straight,” Dimiv agrees from the back seat. “The baby birds have just landed. Stepan’s got them secured at the castle. Half the family is good—let’s take care of the other half.”

“Good.” I look down at the location on my phone. “We’re almost there. Seven minutes.” Nikolai steps on the gas and we hurtle down the road, past suburban cul-de-sacs towards a single house at the end of masses of empty land. “Check in with Dominik for an ETA.”

“We have enough men,” Nikolai says.

“I’m not taking any chances.” I gesture for him to slow down. “Park here and let’s walk down. The area thins out after this point and I don’t want to risk being seen before we’re ready.”

Nikolai parks on the side of the road just behind a thicket of trees. The three of us get out of the car while the rest of the caravan queues up behind us and begins to unload and arm themselves.

Dimiv tucks his phone away. “Dominik is right behind us. Should be here in a minute or so.”

“Good. Dimiv, take a couple of men and try to scope out the back of the house. I want to know what kind of resistance we’re dealing with.”

Nodding, Dimiv picks out three guys and they slip off down the road, using the trees as camouflage. Meanwhile, I grab the binoculars from the back seat of the SUV and aim them at the house in the distance. “We’re looking at two guys in the front... That’s all I can see.”

Nikolai pulls out a box of cigarettes and lights one up. When he sees that I’m watching, he offers me one.

I wave him off. “I’m good. You haven’t smoked in a while.”

He shrugs. “I’m feeling a certain kind of way.”

“Yeah? What way is that?”

“This is the same bastard that killed our parents. Fucked up Lev. This is the motherfucker that tried to sell Polly into sex slavery, tried to rape Alyssa, and now, he’s abducted her for the second time.” As he recites the list of Boris’s sins, I can feel my blood heat up to a boil. “It’s about time we finish off this asshole once and for all.”

I nod. “I couldn’t agree more.”

“Incoming!” Vlad calls from the jeep behind us.

Dominik arrives with two carloads of men in tow. He gets out of the lead vehicle and strides towards Nikolai and me.

“What happened to you?” he asks in alarm as soon as he’s close enough to see Nikolai’s face.

Niko shrugs. “Walked into a door.”

“Must’ve been a hell of a door.” He purses his lips, but doesn’t ask any more questions about the bruises. “What are we doing standing around out here?”

“Just doing a little recon. There’s Dimiv on his way back now.”

My cousin approaches. “There’s a car parked a couple of yards away. Two men inside. There’s bound to be more soldiers inside the house, but we couldn’t tell for sure. Windows are closed, curtains drawn.”

I nod and turn to Dominik. “Can you take care of the guys outside the house? That’ll give me time to get inside without being noticed. I need to do this silently and quickly.”

Dominik checks his weapons as he listens. “No commotion?”

“Not if you can avoid it. I don’t want to risk them hurting Alyssa. She’s in a delicate position and anything might set her off.”

Dominik nods and gestures for his men to follow him. I give him a minute’s head start, then we follow quietly, hidden from sight by the mass of trees. But the closer we get, the more the treeline begins to thin. We stop a few feet shy of where we’d be easily seen.

Dominik twists around to lock eyes with me. “I can try taking them out from here. But there’s a chance I’ll miss.”

I move forward, put my silencer on and take aim. “Don’t worry about it. I got this.”

It takes a second to get my hand to stop shaking, but once I focus on the man on the left, I feel a strange sense of calm settle over me.

This is what I know. It’s what I was raised for, trained for, molded for.

More importantly, the stakes have never been higher. Instead of agitating my nerves, it pulls them back. I’m not about to put Alyssa in further danger because I couldn’t get a hold of myself when she needed me most.

I take a deep breath, open both eyes, and fire. The first bullet catches the first guard right in the forehead. My aim is perfect. I don’t hesitate from there—I slide my gun two inches to the right and shoot again. I’m aiming for this *mudak’s* forehead, too, but I get him in the nose instead, obliterating his face as his blood splatters like abstract art against the white-washed stucco wall behind him.

Nothing moves. Not the birds or the squirrels or the warm California night beyond.

I lower my gun and turn triumphantly to the men behind me. “All’s clear on this side.”

Dominik is staring at me with wide, disbelieving eyes. “Jesus.”

Nikolai just rolls his eyes. “Show off,” he mutters, pushing past Dominik and his men. “Come on, we gotta move fast.”

I give Dominik a parting nod as he takes his men and marches around back. Quietly, I murmur commands to my troops. “Nikolai and Dimiv with me. Anton, watch our backs. Have a vehicle ready to move Alyssa fast if we need to.” I make eye contact with Artem. “And call Dr. Emily. Tell her to be ready at a moment’s notice.”

Once the delegation is taken care of, we move fast for the front door. I make sure to keep an eye on the windows but Dimiv was right—those shutters are nailed down tight. Nothing to be seen there.

“Should we break down the door?” Dimiv asks when we reach the entrance.

“That’s going to create noise,” Nikolai warns.

I ignore both of them and reach for the handle. I twist and push and the door swings open easily. The darkness of the interior yawns like the mouth of a cave. There’s no telling what kind of creatures are waiting within.

“Anyone think that was a little too easy?” Nikolai whispers.

He’s right, but I can’t afford to look a gift horse in the mouth right now. I venture inside, gun at the ready, my red laser dot dancing across the far wall.

I glance around the corner to find three men on the sofa watching a basketball game. All three of us take aim and all three men go down simultaneously with silenced bullets to the backs of their head.

As far as death goes, it’s a good way to go out. Oblivious and entertained.

Their comrades won’t be so lucky.

We move quickly through the house, taking down any man that comes our way. Six more bodies hit the ground before we get to the center of the deceptively large house.

“This is it,” Dimiv whispers. “We’ve covered the whole floor. Every room is empty.”

I shake my head. “There’s a trap door somewhere. Has to be. He’s got her here. I can feel it.”

I start pulling at the paintings and mismatched hangings that decorate the walls in odd places. I hit the jackpot when I reach a long burgundy carpet that’s been nailed to the top of the wall. Tearing it down reveals a narrow, rickety wooden door that opens to a staircase winding down.

More darkness.

More caves.

More unknown creatures beyond.

I pull my gun out and creep down the stairs. It's all silent on the way down, but the moment my boots hit the floor of the basement, a thumping sound echoes between walls. A woman in nurse's scrubs with jet black hair spins around and gasps. She opens her mouth to scream but Nikolai takes her out with a bullet to the throat.

I step over the cooling corpse and towards the last door set in the wall. I kick it open to reveal a blindingly white room. It takes a long time—too damn long—for my eyes to adjust to the change in brightness. But I don't have to wait for my vision to fully clear to realize that this whole situation is fucked.

Beneath the razor-sharp white lights is a bed.

In the bed is my fiancée, with her feet in stirrups and abject misery imprinted on her face.

And beside her... is Boris Sobakin—with a gun to Alyssa's head.

I freeze, but she doesn't seem remotely aware of anything that's happening. I'm not sure if she even knows I'm here. She's still pregnant but it looks like that won't be true for long.

“Get the *fuck* away from my woman, you bastard.”

Boris only laughs and cocks his gun. “I was wondering when you'd show up. Now, the fun can begin.”

URI

“You hurt her and I’ll fucking destroy you,” I snarl. “That’s a promise.”

Boris just shrugs. “You can certainly try. Then again, you *have* tried. Where has it gotten you, hm? I’m still here, standing next to your woman with a gun to her head—and you’re over there, unable to so much as lift a finger.”

He smiles at me before his eyes flit to Dimiv and Nikolai at my sides. “Ouch, that looks like it hurts, Niko,” he laughs. “Wonder who did that to you.”

“Fucking bas—”

I throw my hand out, preventing Nikolai from going any closer. “Don’t.”

Boris laughs calmly. “See? You may have come with manpower, Uri. But a true *pahkan* doesn’t need manpower. Not when I know how to get the upper hand. Not when I have all the leverage.”

He drags the tip of the gun down the side of Alyssa’s face as she writhes around on the bed. Her face is drenched with sweat, her hair matted against her cheeks. She looks like she’s in pain—silent pain.

“When this is all over, this shadow war will become legend. Uri Bugrov, with all his power, all his money, and all his men couldn’t take down the lowly, lonesome Boris Sobakin. One against the universe, and the one is who came out on top.”

His gaze twists to the side and for the first time, I notice Grigory standing there in his white lab coat. My eyes go wide as I stare at the sniveling traitor. “You will pay for this, too,” I promise him in a low snarl.

Grigory doesn’t look anywhere near as calm as Boris does. He’s shaking in his shoes, in his fingertips, in his blue-tinged lips and the bloodshot whites of his eyes.

“Grigory, do me a favor and pass our guests here those handcuffs on the table?” Boris requests pleasantly. “They’re going to cuff themselves to the radiator like good little boys.”

Swallowing hard, Grigory picks up three sets of handcuffs, drops one in the process, picks it up again, and approaches the three of us gingerly. He stops several feet away as though we’re rabid dogs on loose leashes.

At this point, that’s exactly what I feel like.

Boris chuckles. “I think Grigory might feel a little more comfortable if you three drop your guns.” When none of us listen, he presses the gun hard against Alyssa’s temple causing her to whimper loudly. “*Now.*”

I don’t hesitate. I pop out the clip and drop my gun to the ground. I glance behind at Nikolai and Dimiv, who haven’t moved. “Do it.”

They follow suit without question and Grigory, obviously terrified to come any closer, tosses me the first set of handcuffs. I chain myself to the radiator and then Nikolai and Dimiv are forced to do the same.

“There we go. What good boys you are,” Boris snarls with a satisfied smirk on his face.

“Enjoy this while you can,” I hiss. “It’s not going to last long. I’m gonna get out of these cuffs and when I do, nothing you touch will be safe. Especially not that boy you smuggled out of Moscow with his mother.”

Boris shrugs. “My son and his mother are safe. They’re hidden somewhere you’ll never be able to find them. That’s the difference between us, Uri: I protect the things that are of value to me.”

Considering Alyssa is lying in pain in the basement cellar of one of Boris's holdings for the second time in the last six months, I can't exactly argue with him. I have failed to protect my family.

But that changes now.

I don't know how exactly it's going to happen, but I know from the tips of my fingers all the way down to the marrow of my bones that Boris is not walking out of here alive.

Alyssa moans suddenly, her back arching as though she's going into shock. I try to move forward but the cuffs hold me back.

"She's in pain," I growl. "Do something!"

"Oh, I'm planning to." Boris smiles. "But it's probably not what you're hoping for." Then he glances towards Grigory, who looks like he's close to pissing his scrubs. "Get your ass over here and tell me what's taking so long. I thought you induced her?"

Grigory shoots me a furtive glance before turning to Alyssa's bed. "I did... but she's too weak to push out the babies. And they're too small for a natural delivery."

Boris shrugs and pulls out a large blade with a gilded hilt. "Guess I'll just have to cut them out of her stomach."

Is this what it feels like to go mad? Because I feel as though my sanity is holding on by a fraying string right now. If he brings that blade any closer to her, there's no telling what will happen.

"I swear to God, Boris, if you—"

BANG!

The gunshot comes out of nowhere. For a second, I actually believe that Boris has shot Alyssa in the head. Then the gun falls uselessly out of his hand as blood gushes from his arm.

"What the fuck...?" Sobakin gasps, looking down at his injured hand in pure disbelief.

Dominik rushes into the room with a combination of my men and his. Boris takes one look at Dominik and tries to make a grab for his gun. But he doesn't reach it in time.

Grigory does.

Despite his pale face and his constant shivering, the man moves pretty fast for a traitorous coward. He's only a foot from Boris as he raises the gun.

"Give it the fuck here!" Boris snarls. "Give it to—"

BANG!

He did it. Grigory actually pulled the trigger.

Boris flops to his back on the floor, his eyes wide with shock as blood blooms across his chest in ugly spurts. Dominik charges Grigory, taking him out with a punch to the face and ripping the gun out of his hands. Meanwhile, my men release the three of us from our cuffs.

The moment I'm free, I rush to Alyssa. Her eyes are fluttering half-open but there's no light in them, no awareness.

"Alyssa," I say desperately, grabbing her hand. She's so sweaty it almost slips right out of my grip. "Alyssa, can you hear me?"

She doesn't answer apart from a low moan rippling with pain.

"Uri, you want me to kill the bastard?" Dominik asks with his gun pointed at a whimpering Grigory.

"P-please," Grigory begs from the floor. "I k-k-killed him for you..."

I place my hand on Alyssa's forehead. She's burning up. "You killed him because you knew it was over. You were trying to save your own skin."

"Please d-d-don't kill me..."

"I'm not planning to," I say harshly.

Nikolai and Dimiv both look at me like I'm insane. I ignore them. "Get over here and do whatever you can to save her."

And the babies. And remember that if one of them dies—so do you.”

Dominik hauls Grigory back to his feet and shoves him over to Alyssa’s bedside. His eyes scan her body hopelessly. “The babies need to be delivered s-soon,” he stammers. “But if they do, they’ll need machines to help them breathe. They’re too premature to survive on their own, outside of a fully functioning NICU.”

I glance towards Nikolai. “Get an SUV ready and call Emily. We’re moving Alyssa out.”

As my men get ready to shepherd Alyssa out under Nikolai’s supervision, Dominik gets my attention. “Uri, you’re not gonna believe this... but the fucker’s still alive.”

As much as I want to bleed Sobakin dry and crush his bones to ash while he begs for mercy, I can’t think about anything other than Alyssa. Her safety and the safety of our children is my only priority.

“You’ll take care of him?”

Dominik raises his eyebrows. “Definitely.”

“I have only one request: make his death as painful as possible.”

A slow smile spreads across Dominik’s face. “Consider it done.”

URI

Dimiv floors it to the hospital. I stay in the back of the van with Alyssa, who's burning up. "Nikolai, have you contacted Emily?"

"She's waiting for us at St. Mary's Memorial with an O.R. prepared for the C-section. As soon as we get there, we're good to go."

I want to take some relief from that reassurance—but until Alyssa looks me in the eye like she recognizes me, I'm not going to feel anything but dread. There's too much blood staining her thighs, soaking through the hospital gown she's wearing in oceans of red.

I grab her hand as tight as possible and lean in against her ear. "You're going to be okay, baby. You're going to be okay."

Her head twists to the side as though she's listening, but when I meet her eyes, they're closed. Gritting my teeth, I look up and check our progress. "How much longer? We've been on the road forever."

Nikolai laughs bitterly. "We've only been driving three minutes."

Blyat'. Three minutes? Is that all? It feels like ten times that long. I turn my attention back to Alyssa as she moans and grimaces, fresh sweat beading on her forehead. Is that just the pain or did they give her something? Drugs? An epidural? Either one of those things would be preferable to the devastating reality that she just might be losing too much blood to survive this delivery.

“Approaching the hospital!” Dimiv yells from the driver’s seat.

When the doors of the van are thrown open, Emily is standing just outside, already in her scrubs. The nursing staff accompanying her haul the gurney out of the van and start checking her vitals. I can hear the medical jargon flying, but I try not to pay attention to it. There’s no point—it’s out of my hands now. I just need to be there for her.

I jog at her side as they wheel her into the hospital. “I’m coming in with her,” I snarl to Emily fiercely. “Pull whatever strings you need to.”

Her jaw flexes but she doesn’t fight me on that. “You sure you wanna see this?”

“She’s not leaving my sight.”

She leaves it at that and nods to one of her nurses. “Get Mr. Bugrov scrubbed in.” Then she looks over at me. “You’ll need to wash your hands thoroughly before entering my O.R., Uri. That part’s non-negotiable.”

I’m forced to watch as they wheel her into the operating room. “Come with me, sir,” one of the nurses instructs. “Once you’re scrubbed in, you can follow her inside.”

The nurse makes me run through the process three times in agonizing detail before he finally consents. Every time I try to rush it, he reminds me that I’m not the one at risk if I miss something—my woman is. So I do as he says, gritting my teeth against the pain of every passing second.

Finally, when I pass inspection, I shrug on the protective gear and burst through the doors. They’re already prepping Alyssa for surgery. There’s a cloth wall set up just underneath her chest. Emily gestures for me to get behind it.

“Stay by her head, hold her hand, talk to her if you need to. Just stand back and let me do my job, okay?”

I nod silently and sit down beside Alyssa. I press a kiss to her sweaty forehead. Her temperature is a touch cooler than it was twenty minutes ago. That has to be a good sign, right?

“Okay, we’re gonna need to move fast. Once the babies are out, they’ll need to be moved to the NICU immediately. We won’t have much time to work.”

I cling to her hand tightly as I get back to my feet, unable to stomach sitting for so long. From this vantage point, I can see just beyond the wall. Emily’s wielding a scalpel poised over Alyssa’s stomach, with surgical marker trails veering this way and that on her swollen belly.

I have to remind myself to stay put. Seeing someone cut into her goes against every instinct in my body—but those babies need to come out or else they all die.

“Uri.” Emily’s not even looking at me but her voice is strong and confident. “It’s a tough thing to watch. But I’m excellent at what I do. I’m going to save her.”

I bite back my fear and my helplessness. “Do what you have to do.”

The scalpel presses into Alyssa’s stomach and ruby red blood appears instantly. I glance quickly at Alyssa’s face but she doesn’t seem to feel it.

“Don’t worry,” Emily reassures me. “She’s numbed from the neck down.”

She may not be feeling the pain right now, but that doesn’t mean her body’s not going into shock. Her blood pressure starts jumping erratically as Emily lengthens the incision. More blood. More beeping. More snarled medical jargon flying around the room like insects I can’t even begin to understand.

Emily starts barking an endless stream of orders to her staff and it takes everything I have in me not to go snatch the tools from her hands and try to do it all myself. With an agonized sigh, I drop back to my stool beside Alyssa’s head and focus on her face.

“You’re going to be okay,” I tell her fiercely. “You’re a fighter, Alyssa Bugrov. You’re a fucking warrior. You’re going to survive this and so are our babies.”

I keep talking through the frantic sounds and metallic clinks of medical instruments, the unsettling screeches of this and that piece of equipment. I keep whispering to her even after I've stopped listening to myself. I keep trying to give her comfort hoping that some part of her can hear me right now. And then —

“Waaaahhh!”

My heart skips a beat. Never have I heard anything quite as emotional or quite as beautiful as that piercing, high-pitched shriek. Just like that...

I'm a father.

“Get that little fighter out of here,” Emily's voice booms over my head. “The other one's right behind her. Right... here.”

Her? Did I hear that right? Do I have a daughter?

I don't hear the second baby, though. The nurses whisk them both off before I get a chance to see either one of them. It doesn't matter; I can't bring myself to look away from Alyssa. Her skin has lost all its color in a matter of seconds. She's starting to turn gray, ashen, cold to the touch.

“Uri.” Emily's voice snaps me out of my reverie. “I'm going to need you to leave now.”

“I'm not going anywhere.”

“I know this is hard, but you're going to have to trust me,” she insists. “I'm going to save Alyssa but you need to give me the room to do that.”

I stand up and step back. “I'll give you room,” I tell her. “But I'm staying right here.”

Emily meets my eyes. She must see the determination in my face because she sighs defeatedly. “Fine. But in this O.R., I'm the *pahkan*. Got that?”

Under different circumstances, I might have smiled. Laughed, even. But all I can do now is nod. I'll save the laughs for later.

When she's healed.

When she's safe.

When she's in my arms where she belongs.



The moment her eyes open, they focus on me. It's the sharp, intense stare of someone who recognizes the person they're staring at, even through the bleary delirium of drugs and pain and labor.

"Alyssa," I whisper her name. "Fuck. I'm so sorry."

It's amazing how easily that apology rolls off my tongue. It costs me nothing at all to say. In truth, it makes me feel lighter, freer somehow. Maybe that's why I keep saying it.

"I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry..."

She raises her arm weakly and places a limp finger against my lips. "Shh..." She squints against the light and looks from side to side. When she tries to say something, it comes out only as a feeble croak. She clears her throat and tries again. "Wh... where am I?"

"St. Mary's."

She frowns. "B-Boris?"

My hands clench into fists automatically, but I keep my expression neutral. "He can't hurt you anymore."

She closes her eyes and sighs. "You're sure?"

"A hundred percent."

Dominik sent me pictures about an hour ago while Alyssa was still sleeping. They were graphic, even by the bloody standards of our world. Hell, even my stomach churned uncomfortably when I saw some of them. He wasn't quite dead in the last of them, but he didn't have much time left in this life.

No less than he deserves.

"My babies," she mumbles, trying to sit up and failing. "Wh... where...?"

Panic flits across her face but I grab her hand and squeeze it gently. “They’re in the NICU. Emily is monitoring them both closely. Both girls are doing well.”

Her eyes flare. “Girls?”

I nod. “We have daughters, Alyssa. We have two daughters.”

A little bubble of laughter bursts through her teeth as more consciousness comes to her eyes, clearing away that fog. “Oh, God... I can’t believe it. And they’re doing okay?”

“They’re doing great. They’re both warriors, just like their mother.” She blinks and a tear slips down her cheek. “I’ve been going back and forth to the NICU every hour to check on them. One is a little smaller than the other, but Emily believes that she’ll catch up in no time. They’re so tiny... so tiny and so sweet.”

More tears start running down her cheeks. “I want to see them.”

I hesitate. “You’re still weak.”

“I’m not too weak for this. I want to see them, Uri.”

“Alyssa, I—”

She puts her hand on my arm and looks me in the eye. “You owe me.”

Dammit. She’s right. I do owe her for the hell I’ve put her through.

“I’ll get you a wheelchair.”

A few minutes later, I’m wheeling her down the corridors towards the neonatal unit. We reach the glass wall and Alyssa sucks in a sharp breath.

Our girls are lying in side-by-side incubators, both hooked up to a huge array of tubes, their little chests rising and falling with effort. They look pink, frail, alien.

“Oh my God,” Alyssa gasps as she sets eyes on the smaller of our twins. “She’s so *tiny*.”

“Don’t let her size fool you. That kid is all fight.”

Alyssa's gaze turns to the second baby. "They're here," she whispers, as though she's trying to reassure herself. "They're here and they're safe."

"Yes, they are. *You* kept them safe." I drop down to my knees in front of her and dab the tears from her face. "You did so good, Alyssa."

She smiles, eyes sparkling with more tears yet to come. "You saved us."

I shake my head. "I don't deserve any of the credit. I was an asshole. I should never have believed that bullshit that Grigory —"

Just like she did before, she presses a fingertip to my lips. "I guess you're just gonna have to spend the rest of our lives making it up to me."

I smile. "It would be my honor." I lean in and rest my forehead against hers, relishing for one moment how good it is to have her in my arms, warm and awake and alive, with color in her cheeks and fire in her eyes.

"We have to think of names," she points out. "I actually have one in mind."

"So do I. Katya. For my mother."

She smiles softly. "Zena. For my sister."

"That was easy." I grin and stroke a fallen lock of hair away from her face.

Alyssa rests her head on my shoulder and looks towards the two incubators. "Zena and Katya Bugrov... wow. We have *two* children, Uri."

"We have a family." I wrap my arm around her. "And I am never letting anything hurt any of you ever again."

She sighs deeply and snuggles closer. "I know."

Her confidence in me is everything. Her trust is everything. And I make a solemn vow to myself never to betray that trust again.

"I love you, Alyssa."

She turns to me in shock. “What?” I ask, surprised by her reaction.

“You’ve never said that to me before.”

“Well... get used to it.”

She cups my face with the palm of her hand. “I love you, too, Uri Bugrov. It’s you and me now, okay? This is it.”

I disagree.

This isn’t “it.”

This is *everything*.

EPILOGUE: ALYSSA

“You’re *sure*?”

Emily nods reassuringly. “I wouldn’t be releasing this baby unless she was a hundred percent ready to leave the hospital. She doesn’t need us anymore, Alyssa. She needs *you*.”

My bottom lip trembles as I reach for my little girl. At almost five months, Zena is still small. She’s about the same size Katya was at three months. But she’s a good little feeder and her lungs are a force to be reckoned with.

She slides into the crook of my arm and I breathe in that baby milk smell that clings to her rosy cheeks. She opens her dark brown eyes, fixes them on me, and gurgles softly before breaking into a gummy, happy smile as though she knows we’re going home today.

“Are you ready, my little warrior?” I ask, looking down at her. “Are you ready to get out of here? Start some adventures with your sister?” She gurgles again and I kiss her head. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

Uri steps to my side with Katya in his arms. She’s got a chubby hand clinging to his shirt like she’s scared someone will try and rip her from him.

“Look who it is, Katya!” I exclaim quietly. “Your twin sister.”

Katya babbles excitedly.

I glance towards Emily. “Thank you so much. You can’t know how grateful we both are for everything you did for the girls. And for me, too.”

She waves away my gratitude. “Please. It was my job.”

“It was Grigory’s job, too, and he betrayed us,” Uri growls with an anger rippling in his undertone that I don’t think will ever go away.

Emily’s face sours the moment Grigory’s name is mentioned. “He was a sorry excuse for a doctor,” she says in a flat monotone. “Lucky for us, he’s no longer here.”

I still haven’t asked Uri what happened to Grigory. I figured he disappeared the same way Boris Sobakin did—and honestly? I didn’t care. After what each of those monsters tried to do to my girls, they deserved their ends. The details of how they left this earth aren’t important to me.

“Go on now,” Emily encourages. “Take her home. And don’t stress out about every little thing. Babies are resilient. They’re made to survive new parents. You can do this, Alyssa.”

I smile nervously as Uri steers me towards the door. I know deep down that I can do this. It’s just that sometimes, reality is a lot more no-holds-barred than the picture you create in your head. Fantasies of becoming a mother are always sunlit and breezy and smell nice. The truth of motherhood is... a little bit less polished.

When we first brought Katya home, I spent every waking moment with her. I refused both a nanny and a night nurse in favor of doing it all myself. I suppose it was my guilt kicking in. I couldn’t be with one of my babies, so I compensated by being with the other one all the time.

Turned out, it wasn’t the healthiest plan. After a month of nonstop work, Uri had to sit down with me and force me to take a break.

“You can’t do this *all* by yourself, Alyssa. More importantly, you don’t need to.”

“I don’t want to rely on nannies—”

“I’m not talking about nannies; I’m talking about *family*. Polina is happy to babysit. So is Nikolai. Dimiv’s bringing his wife and kids over in a few weeks and I’m sure Dagmara will

be overjoyed to pitch in as well. I can't be the only one you allow to take her when you're not around."

I still didn't listen. A week later, I fell asleep holding Katya and she slipped out of my hands. She'd been wrapped in a thick, fleece blanket, so there wasn't so much as a single bruise on her perfect head. But she let me know I'd messed up. She wailed all the way to the car, all the way to the hospital, all the way from the parking lot to the building. Of course, she stopped crying literally seconds before we stepped into Emily's exam room. I could almost swear she winked at me, that little sneak.

But it was the wake-up call I needed. After that, I got better at relinquishing control to other people. It turned out to be the best decision I could have made for both of us. Polly was madly in love with her new niece. Nikolai doted on her like every day is Christmas.

The most surprising reaction of all, though, was Lev's.

It was amazing how mellow he became around Katya. At first, he was wary, but once he breached that initial hesitation, he seemed more fascinated than anything else. He could sit and watch her for hours.

Of all the connections Katya had made with her family, that was the one that made me the most emotional.

And now, we're about to do it all over again.

Uri drives us home while I sit in the backseat between both babies snuggled up in their car seats. I look back and forth, back and forth, over and over again like something terrible will happen if I go more than a second or two without making sure each of them is exactly where they were last. That old, familiar fear is back in my throat, tasting like blood.

It's only when we pull up in front of the mansion that I finally look out through the front windshield for the first time since we left the hospital. When I do, I see a huge banner draped over the doorway.

WELCOME HOME, BABY ZENA!

Hand-painted flowers line the borders of the banner. I see Polina's careful strokes and Lev's bright splashes of color. If I'm not mistaken, the spiky one in the corner that looks almost reluctantly drawn is the work of none other than Nikolai Bugrov, that fake stoic cupcake of a man.

And all three of them are clustered on the front stoop, watching anxiously as we emerge from the car. As soon as I'm on my feet, Pol leads the charge over. She plucks Katya from Uri's arms without even bothering to ask for permission. Lev and Nikolai follow, though Niko keeps a careful hand on Lev's shoulder to make sure he doesn't stray too far.

"What do you think, Lev?" I ask softly. Zena fell asleep on the drive over here with one palm pressed to her cheek. "This is your other niece, Zena."

He claps his hands over his mouth. "She's so *little*."

I nod. "Yes—but she's strong."

"She's going to be okay?" When I nod again, he smiles and glances back down at her. "Can I touch her?"

"Go for it."

He trails a finger over her forehead gingerly. Then over her one exposed cheek. She stirs just a bit, her lips opening and closing like a little goldfish.

We herd our way into the living room, one big, shuffling mass of Bugrovs. I guide Lev to a seat in the armchair and help situate Zena in his arms. He doesn't move a muscle, barely daring to breathe as he just gazes down at her like she's the most perfect thing in the world.

He might be onto something there.

As I watch, Uri comes up behind me, his arms looping around my waist as his lips press to the back of my head. It's then that I finally take a breath and enjoy the whole scene.

Lev, holding Zena gingerly in his arms as he tries not to jostle her. Polly, bouncing Katya on her hip while she peppers her with kisses. Nikolai looming over both of them, checking back and forth with the hint of a smile fluttering on his lips.

“Both our girls are finally home.” I sigh, letting out a pent-up breath I’ve held in for five long months.

Uri squeezes me tighter. “You did it.”

“*We* did it.”

He chuckles. “Oh, no. I know when to take credit and when to cede the spotlight. This was you, *narushitel*. You did this.”

Laughing, I rest my head back against his chest. He underplays his role a lot, but I know just how lucky I am. He wakes up with me every night for every feeding. He’s changed more diapers than I have by several orders of magnitude. There’s never been any doubt in my mind that *we*, the girls and I, are his highest priority.

A familiar tingle spreads through my body. I haven’t felt it in so long that, for a while there, I was worried I’d never feel it again. But as it turns out, I needed time. My body needed to heal first. Then my mind.

I twist around in Uri’s arms so that I can face him. “Hey. Since our babysitters have got this covered, wanna come with me?”

His eyebrows tilt downward curiously. “Lead the way.”

I leave the girls with their uncles and aunt and lead Uri upstairs to our newly renovated master bedroom. I make him sit on the edge of the bed, then I extricate myself from his grasp and step back. Slowly, I start to undo the buttons of my dress.

“Alyssa...”

“Shh. Sit and watch.”

“It’s not that I don’t love what’s happening,” Uri rumbles. “But... are you sure?”

“It’s been over six months,” I point out.

“And I’ll wait a century if that’s what you need.”

I love him for saying it. For being so patient with me. I was cleared for sex months ago. But with Zena still in hospital, I was just not in the right headspace for that kind of intimacy. And Uri never once pressured me. He held me at night,

comforted me to sleep, picked up the weight of my load whenever he could. We may not have been having sex, but that didn't stop me from falling deeper and deeper in love with him with each passing day.

How could I not? It was so easy. So effortless.

Every time I saw him soothe Katya. Or sing to Zena in the hospital. Every time he took Katya from my arms so that I could sleep and made me endless cups of tea and laid out my clothes and cooked and this and that and that and this. All those little gestures, those little moments of tenderness... that was lovemaking in its own way.

I wriggle the dress down my hips and step out of it when it puddles to my feet. "I've had enough time. I want you. I want my man."

He winces as, with my eyes on his, I make a show of removing my bra, then my panties. "*Fuck*," he mutters, taking in my body as though it's a work of art. "You're so fucking perfect."

I glance down at the new scar just under my belly. At first, I hated it. Even now, I'm self-conscious of the red, knotted flesh. But every night, before we go to sleep, Uri kisses it. And while I may never be a huge fan of the marks of what happened to me, I am a fan of *that*.

"It makes you all the more beautiful, you know. The scar. It's perfect."

The tears spring to my eyes instantly. "Uri..."

He leans forward, grabs my hand and pulls me towards him. "It's a sign of everything you've overcome. It's a testament to how tough you are. I wish you didn't have to have it, but *fuck*, I'm so glad you're the type of woman who can wear it so proudly."

More tears are close to breaking loose and my lip is wobbling like crazy now—but he isn't done yet.

He reaches out and pulls me into the circle of his arms. His hands are soft and huge on my hips as he kisses my neck and murmurs, "But you know what scar I like even better... is *this*

one.” I’m confused until he leans down and presses a kiss into the tiny little ripple on my thigh.

The place where, what feels like lifetimes ago, I caught a nail sticking out of a certain someone’s fence.

I laugh and cup his head in my hands. His hunger for me is obvious in every motion, in the way he grips my ass and pulls me as close as possible—but he’s holding back. It’s been so long that there’s a new kind of anxious, uncertain excitement that’s crept in between us.

It feels like the first time all over again.

There’s all the urgency and passion of physical desire that’s been slowly building steam over months of abstinence. But there’s the comfort and safety in the emotional connection the two of us have built together. We share two beautiful daughters; we share a wealth of experiences. Some are good, some are bad, some are a shrink’s wet dream.

But we’ve weathered through every storm together. And we’ve come out on the other side stronger than before.

We fall back onto the bed together as the kiss deepens. I’m writhing around on Uri like I’m scared he’ll disappear. Between my thighs, I’m wetter than I can remember ever being in my entire life.

At some point, his clothes vanish and he slides into me. We move together, slow and cautious at first, then a little bit faster and a little bit more needy. He lets me dictate the pace from the top.

Soon, “caution” is a word of the past. I’m bucking wildly, my hands planted on his chest for balance as my hips move in a desperate blur. He rises up to kiss my breasts as I bounce on his lap and moan up to the ceiling above us.

My nails dig into his back as the orgasm hits. “Uri,” I gasp wildly. “Oh God... I’m coming... I’m com—ohh.”

He groans along with me as we ride out the waves together. The motion slows and softens until we’re just a tangle of limbs and heavy breathing again.

Past the buzzing in my extremities, I'm only vaguely aware of his lips as he kisses his way up to my throat. "That was..."

"Amazing?"

He chuckles. "Definitely. But entirely too fast. Next time will be a little more deliberate."

"Tonight?" I ask hopefully.

His eyes are bright and mischievous as they stare down at me. "When have I ever needed more than five minutes with you, my little thief?"

I chew at my lip. "What about the girls?"

"Let's take an hour for ourselves. We deserve it."

I smirk. "An hour, huh? That's, like... at least three more orgasms' worth."

"Only three?" He nips playfully at the underside of my jaw. "You're underestimating me."

I laugh. "I don't think I can handle any more than three."

A slow grin spreads across his face. "We'll just have to see about that."

EXTENDED EPILOGUE: ALYSSA

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