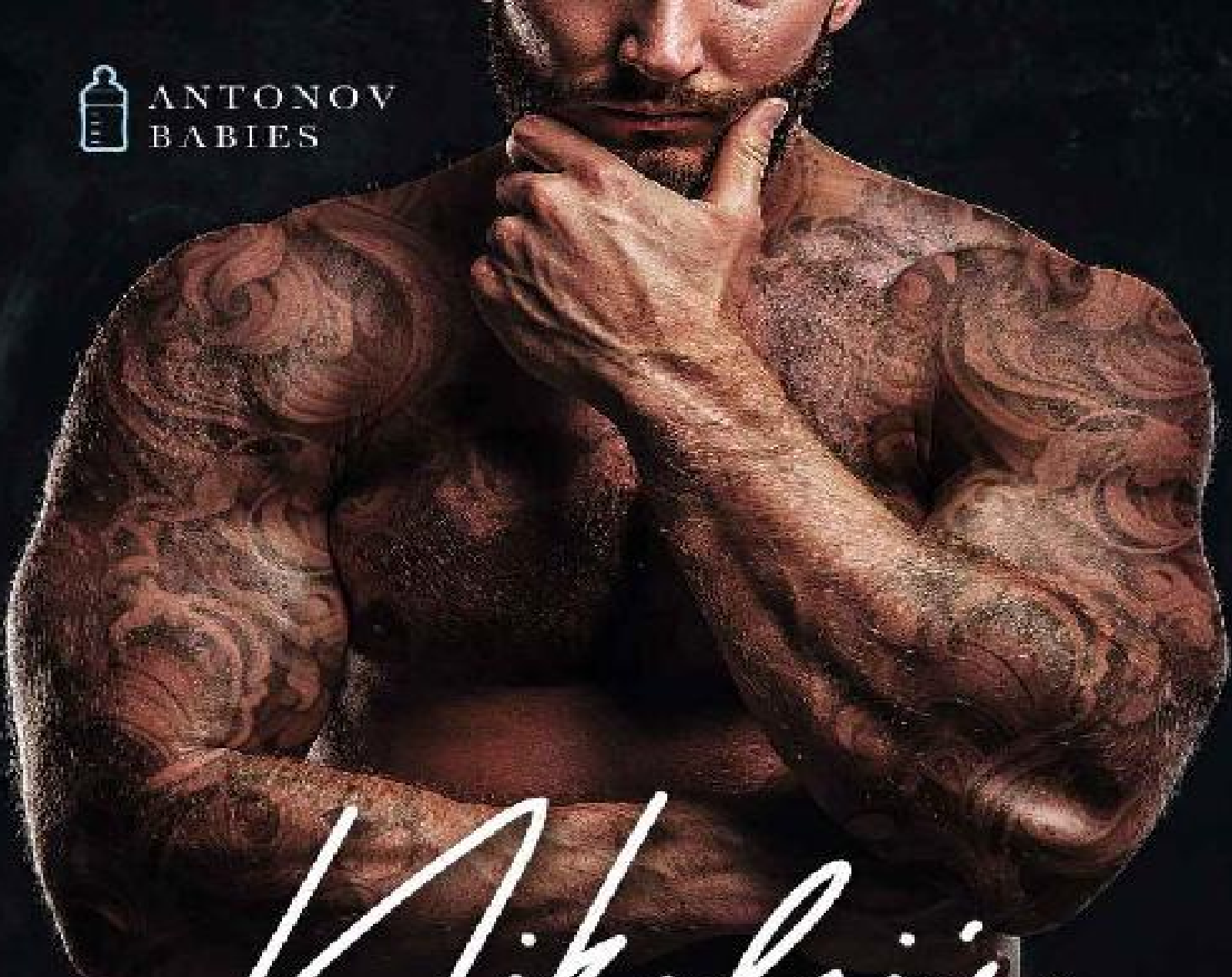




ANTONOV
BABIES



Nikolai's
BABY

A RUSSIAN MAFIA ROMANCE

BELLA KING

NIKOLAI'S BABY

A RUSSIAN MAFIA ROMANCE

ANTONOV BABIES

BELLA KING

AFTER MIDNIGHT

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Epilogue

BLURB

I despised Nikolai Antonov.

It didn't matter that he was drop-dead gorgeous, rich beyond comprehension, and totally obsessed with me.

His rock-solid abs and lustful banter weren't going to convince me to crawl into bed with him.

Even when agreed to help rescue my cousin who was kidnapped by the Cartel, my opinion of him didn't budge.

He was toxic, and I wanted absolutely nothing to do with him...

Until I got pregnant with his baby.

Dream

They're going to find me.

And then I'm going to spend the rest of my life in prison.

I turn the dial down on the radio as it begins to crackle and lose signal. Bluetooth doesn't work in this old car, and the radio has gone from playing pop, to oldies, to static. It should be picking up some Mexican stations soon, but in the meantime, it's just me and my anxious thoughts.

When I was younger, I used to dream about taking a long car trip through the United States, stopping at old diners in the desert and winding my way up and around snowcapped mountains. It sounded like the best thing a girl could do in her early twenties, before she got bogged down by the oppressive responsibilities that all but the richest (and often, poorest) adults seem to have.

I had a map in my college dormitory, and I swore the second I got out I was going to take the longest trip I could.

But first I had to find a job.

And then I had to save up money faster than gas prices skyrocketed.

And once I had the money, my cousin Eddy got kidnapped by the Cartel.

So now, I'm taking that money and using it to get this bucket of bolts across the border with ten kilograms of a newly synthesized stimulant in the trunk.

It's not my idea of a fun road trip, but I'm not going to let a bunch of thugs kill Eddy. I don't care what he got wrapped up in. He's a good guy, and he doesn't deserve any of this.

Well, neither do I, but that's why I'm going to make this quick.

The road in front of me stretches out so far that it disappears on the horizon, and to either side of me there's nothing but dry earth and the occasional desert shrub. It's not much of a view, but that's a good thing. Nobody else is out here, and that means I have a chance of getting across the border unnoticed.

Diego, my Cartel contact, assured me that getting into Mexico wasn't a problem. On the way out, however, there's a fifty-fifty chance of my car being torn apart by Border Patrol agents, but by that time, I'll be clean as a whistle.

No drugs here. Search all you like!

Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't trust a member of the Cartel with the change in my pocket, but these aren't pennies we're talking about.

These are drugs, and the Cartel wants them badly enough to kidnap Eddy. They're not going to let me get thrown in jail and risk losing their prize.

That's what I tell myself, anyway.

In truth, I don't know what's waiting for me as I approach the Mexican border on this lonely stretch of cracked asphalt. I could be driving straight into a week-long interrogation in a room without windows.

And with this amount of drugs, they probably wouldn't care that I'm a U.S. citizen. I'm sure they'd go Guantanamo Bay on my ass in a heartbeat.

I wring the steering wheel with my sweaty hands and try to focus on something else, *anything* else, to take my mind off the grim reality of what I'm doing.

I turn the radio back on, and I'm met with an upbeat song in Spanish.

I must be close.

Sweat drips down my temple and I try to wipe it away, but my hands are too sweaty to do anything. I'm so hot now that I'm pretty sure I could wring half a gallon of sweat out of my t-shirt.

Driving through Texas without air conditioning was a mistake, but not bringing water was even stupider. I was too scared to stop at the gas station and pick anything up after I left Eddy's old apartment with the drugs. The adrenaline rush of leaving a felony's worth of stimulants unattended in the parking lot would've killed me.

But dying of dehydration will be much worse.

I consider turning around. I passed a gas station about thirty miles back, and I don't have to be in Dimalona until Thursday.

No, I'm not risking another run through town. That place was crawling with Border Patrol agents, and I'm sure if they witnessed me driving back and forth at the Mexican border, they'd pull me over and search the car.

Hello, life in prison.

And goodbye Eddy.

I'm not sure which one would be worse, but I won't have to choose if I get caught with the drugs. The Cartel isn't going to keep Eddy alive if I lose the drugs he stole from them. They're mad enough already, and it was only by luck that they found my number in his phone and decided to try to get their drugs back.

About ten-thousand dollars' worth. That's what Diego told me, but the money isn't what I'm concerned about. Eddy means more to me than anything. If it wasn't for him, I would've been on the streets at the vulnerable age of fourteen.

I owe everything to Eddy and his life of crime, but karma has come to collect, and I'm the one who has to pay the price.

Lost in my thoughts again, I realize I'm going twenty miles over the speed limit just a second too late. Slowing down doesn't stop the big white SUV

from pulling out onto the road behind me.

And once those lights come on, I know it's game over.

They found me.

And now I'm going to spend the rest of my life in prison.

Nikolai

I know a Cartel vehicle when I see one, and the one racing toward the border like they're already being chased definitely belongs to them. I'm just surprised they pulled over when I flashed my lights.

I have to be careful. Impersonating a Border Patrol agent isn't going to prevent me from getting shot in the gut should they realize I'm onto them. Pretending that I'm giving them a speeding ticket is going to be my best option until I figure out who's in that car.

"Just one of us," I say to Jasha as he unbuckles his seatbelt. "Do you want to go?"

He shrugs. "I thought we were busting their asses."

"Just a speeding ticket until we figure out who they are," I reply, pulling over behind the idling Cartel vehicle. "Maybe a warning if they turn out not to be from the Cartel, but I doubt it with a junker like that."

"Ugly little thing," he agrees.

Nobody in their right mind would be driving such a beat-up old car out here in the desert heat. One blown tire or oil leak, and you're on your way to burn to a crisp in the blazing sun while waiting for assistance.

And they hardly ever come this close to the border. They'd sooner abandon

you out here to die than risk getting mixed up with the Cartel.

Or the Russian Bratva.

“So I’ll go,” I say, putting our stolen police cruiser in park.

Jasha nods, but he’s not looking at me. He’s leaning forward and peering out the windshield, trying to analyze how much of a threat is contained in the car in front of us. It can’t be that much. The windows aren’t tinted, and it doesn’t appear that there’s anyone inside but the driver.

Plus, they pulled over, which isn’t something they would do if they thought they’d get caught.

Maybe it’s not Cartel after all, but then who the hell would be driving a car like that so quickly toward the border?

I’m about to find out.

I step out of the car, walking casually up to the side of the car as the occupant rolls their window down. I keep one hand rested on my holster, turning slightly to the side as I come up to the driver’s side.

I expect to see a man with leathery suntanned skin and shifty eyes, someone unmistakably neck-deep in Cartel operations. At the very least, it should be someone who very obviously is doing something they shouldn’t, but I’m stunned when I see someone who sidesteps my expectations entirely.

I’m looking into the bright blue eyes of a young woman, her face flushed and glistening with sweat, her expression wrought with a mixture of fear and surprise. She’s just as taken aback to see me as I am to see her.

I’m caught totally off-guard. If she were a Cartel member holding a gun against the inside of the door, I’d probably be dead by now, but she isn’t, and that means I need to figure out how to handle her without raising too much suspicion. I don’t need civilians calling the actual police on me for impersonating an officer.

“You were going a bit fast there,” I say, keeping my voice steady. My Russian accent is thick, but I’ve learned that confidence is everything when playing a role. “Can I see your license, please?”

The woman behind the wheel swallows hard, and her hands shake as she reaches for her purse. “Of course, officer. I’m sorry, I didn’t realize how fast I was going.”

Her voice is soft, trembling, and I can sense her fear. It’s not just the fear of being pulled over, but something deeper. Something that makes me suspicious all over again.

She’s sweating like she was running through the desert instead of driving, and that’s not normal for someone with nothing to hide.

I take the license from her, noting her name and details. An American, but not from Texas. “What brings you out here, so close to the border, Ms...” I glance at the license again. “Dream?”

Her blue eyes dart to the rearview mirror, perhaps looking for an escape route, or maybe checking on my partner. “I’m just... traveling. Seeing the sights.”

“Traveling?” I echo back to her, raising an eyebrow. “In this vehicle? Through the desert?”

She nods, biting her plump lower lip, and I find my gaze drawn there. I quickly look away, focusing on the car’s interior for other signs that something is amiss. I don’t see any luggage, but it could be in the trunk.

“It’s an adventure,” Dream says, a weak smile on her face. “A sort of bucket list thing.”

If I was a better man, I’d let her be on her way. She’s not said anything completely wrong yet, and while I certainly want to believe her...

I can’t.

I don’t buy it.

I lean into the window, picking up the smell of her perfume. It’s sweet and fresh, something completely foreign to me after dealing with men in the Texas heat all day. It almost makes me forget what I’m about to say as I hand Dream’s license back to her.

“Is there something you want to tell me, Dream?” I ask.

She shakes her head so hard that I'm certain she's lying.

I sigh. "I don't want to do this, ma'am, but you're really giving me no choice. I'm going to have to search your car. I hope you understand."

Her face turns a ghostly shade of white, and she stammers, "S-search? Why?"

"Routine procedure," I lie, trying to keep my voice gentle. "Please take the keys out of the ignition and step out of the car."

I watch her hands closely as she turns off the car and gets out, but there's no obvious attempt to find anything but reassurance and support as she steps out onto the asphalt.

She's terrified, not aggressive and combative like she'd be if she was with the Cartel.

I've already ruled that out, but *something* is wrong, and I need to know what it is. This is Bratva territory, and I'm the boss. Nothing shady goes on under my nose without me knowing about it.

Dream's legs shake like she's just learning to walk, and she leans on the car for support.

"Fuck," she yelps, jumping back.

She looks at me and shrinks down again. "Sorry, it's hot."

I try not to laugh. This must be her first time this far down south.

"Just don't cause any trouble," I warn as she checks her arm for burns. "Give me your keys. I need to check the trunk."

Her demeanor shifts back to terrified, and I know I've stumbled upon something important. It doesn't matter how beautiful and innocent Dream appears to be. I know she's hiding something, and it's probably in the trunk of her car.

I keep one hand on my holster as I take the keys from her and unlock the trunk. She's staring at me like I'm about to pull it out and shoot her, but so far, she hasn't given me any reason to do that.

She's not a threat, but whatever is in her trunk has her believing that she's in serious trouble.

I nod to Jasha, who's leaning all the way out the window to get a look at what's going on. I'm surprised he hasn't come out to help me, but then again, how hard can handling a young woman with no obvious criminal ties be?

It's only once I open the trunk and open the conspicuous duffle bag lying there that I realize she's wrapped up in something far greater than herself. And if I'm not careful, it's going to get both of us killed.

Dream

He shuts the trunk of the car and immediately grabs my arm. His grip is like iron, firm and unforgiving as he drags me over to his SUV and pushes me over the hood.

“It’s not mine,” I whine, but it’s obvious that he doesn’t care.

He pushes me against the hot surface of his hood, and I cry out from the heat. I’m not in a place to negotiate, but this seems like a gross overreaction to drug smuggling. I’m clearly not a physical threat to him, but he’s treating me like I’m trying to fight back, using his oversized muscles to force me into a position where I can barely breathe.

“Stop it,” I wheeze, panic lurching up into my throat.

“Shut up,” he growls, pulling me off the scalding surface of the hood and holding me over it like a threat. “You’re in a world of trouble. Where the fuck did you get that much Protodafinil?”

“I don’t know what that is,” I cry. “I don’t know anything.”

“Don’t play stupid with me. Nobody just happens to be driving toward the Mexican border with that much P50 in their trunk. Who are you running drugs for? The Cartel?”

It’s hopeless. He’s already figured me out, and pretending like I’m innocent

isn't going to help me. Pleading the fifth might work better, so that's what I do. I close my mouth and shut the fuck up before I get myself into the type of trouble that even the best lawyer can't get me out of.

But it's probably already too late for that.

"Tell me what you know, god damn it," he snarls, shaking me over the car as his partner comes out.

"I'm pleading the fifth," I reply, trying not to sound so uncertain of myself, "So take me to jail if you need to."

He laughs, and it's unusually cold for a police officer. "You're not going to jail, Dream. You're going to someplace where people don't come back from, but that's only if you keep playing games with me and dodging questions. Do you want that? Do you want to end it all for the Cartel?"

"You can't do that," I whine, trying to wriggle loose. "Let me go!"

"I can do anything I want," he replies. Then he looks toward his partner. "Jasha, make room in the back seat. She's coming with us."

I yelp as he jerks me away from the hood of his car, keeping my hands pinned behind my back as he moves me toward the rear of the SUV. I don't want to go with them, but I'm still relieved when I'm tossed in the backseat and I'm met with crisp, cool air conditioning.

Jasha slides into the front seat and glares at me, his eyes just as vivid and piercing as the officer who found the drugs. "You're so fucked," he says, shaking his head. "Nikolai must've found something real bad if he's taking you in."

I shrink away from him, mortified by his tone and deep Russian accent. I'm beginning to suspect that neither of these men are typical Border Patrol agents.

But then who are they?

I don't have time to ask before Nikolai comes back with the duffle bag and tosses it into Jasha's lap. "She had this in the trunk of her car. Claims she doesn't know where it came from," he grumbles as he starts the car.

Jasha's eyes grow wide as he opens the bag, and then he looks at me. "P50? Where the fuck did you get something like that?"

"She claims to be pleading the fifth," Nikolai replies for me.

Jasha laughs, rubbing the stubble on his prominent chin. "You can't do that out here, missy. People go missing all the time. You wouldn't be any exception."

My stomach twists in a knot so tight that I can barely talk. "You can't... you can't do that."

"We can do anything we want," he replies, turning to Nikolai. "Is that right, Nikolai?"

Nikolai nods, smirking at me as his green eyes flash in the rearview mirror. "That's right, Dream. We can do anything we want because we're not actually Border Patrol agents. We're above the law, and we don't play nice with the Cartel."

"Then who are you?" I ask, almost too afraid to hear the answer.

"Should we tell her?" Jasha asks, turning to Nikolai again.

He shrugs. "I don't see why not. It's not like we're going to let her go."

Jasha gives me a mockingly apologetic look. "Boss says you're screwed, so it doesn't matter if you know we're with the Bratva."

"The what?" I ask, praying that's not some kind of rival Cartel gang.

"The Russian mafia, missy."

"In Texas?"

Jasha looks slightly offended. "We're anywhere we want to be, bitch! So start talking before Nikolai over here stops the car and starts digging your grave."

"You'd be the one digging," Nikolai grumbles.

Jasha rolls his eyes. "The point is, you're dead unless you talk."

And I'm probably dead even if I do, but I'm not going to gain anything from

making them angrier than they already are, so I spill the truth. It's my final chance to gain any sympathy from them.

"I told you, I'm not with the Cartel. They forced me to do it. They said if I didn't take the bag to Dimalona, they'd kill my cousin Eddy," I say, trying to make it sound like I didn't know what was in the bag. Technically, I didn't know it was P50. I just knew they were drugs, and expensive ones.

Jasha looks at me, then looks at Nikolai for support. "What do you think? Sound believable?"

"There's no reason a girl like her would be carrying around that much P50 in her car unless she was being coerced into it. So far, her story adds up, but we're still taking her to the house for more thorough questioning."

Jasha's eyes narrow as he turns to look at me once more. "More thorough questioning means you'd better not be lying to us, missy. My brother has a way with extracting the truth."

God, just what I need. Two Bratva brothers attempting to extract their version of the truth out of a woman who is practically a third of their size. Don't they realize I'm not a threat to them? I'm the victim here, and they have no right to treat me like I'm the one who orchestrated the drug run.

I look out the window, searching the horizon for some sign of where we are. If I can call the real police and tell them what happened, I might be able to get out of this without being tied to the drugs that Jasha is carrying in his lap.

After all, who would believe that a twenty-three-year-old woman with no criminal history was the one carrying ten kilograms of a barely known schedule 1 drug.

I can't tell where we are by looking, but perhaps the police could locate me anyway if I call them. I know my kidnapers' names, and they're driving in an SUV with lights on the top. It's worth a shot.

I pull my phone from my pocket, keeping it to my side so that Jasha and Nikolai won't see it. I flick my thumb across the screen to unlock it, and quietly open the calling app.

My thumb hits the first number.

BEEP

“What the fuck is that?” Nikolai growls. “Is she calling someone?”

Jasha turns around in his seat, grabbing at my phone as I try to pull it back. I’ve already been caught, but if I can get a call out, it might not have been for nothing.

“Give me that, you little bitch.” Jasha practically climbs into the backseat to take my phone, prying it from my fingers easily. “You got anything else you want to tell me about?”

I pull my knees up to my chest, and from this position, I’m tempted to kick him, but I know that wouldn’t do anything but anger him further. My only chance of escape is gone, and my only hope is that they spare my life once I’ve given them what they want.

If they’re pissed off at me, I can hardly see that happening.

“I don’t have anything else. Please, I just wanted to make sure my cousin was okay.”

“Enough about your stupid cousin,” Jasha barks, waving my phone at me like a weapon. “If you called someone, the only person you’re going to have to worry about is yourself.”

“I didn’t call anyone, I swear. You can check,” I plead, my voice catching in my throat.

Nikolai glances at me in the rearview mirror, his green eyes narrowing. “I should’ve searched you before I put you in the car, but I wanted to preserve your dignity. Well, once we get to the house, we’re really going to make sure you’re not hiding anything. There’s no dignity for liars like you.”

Jasha chuckles, falling back into his seat. “We’ll be checking every crack and crevice.”

“I will,” Nikolai interjects. “You’re going to go weigh and analyze the drugs.”

The idea of Nikolai strip-searching me sends a chill through my body, but it’s not the kind it should be. I should be terrified, and I am, but there’s

something else, some little spark of excitement that's wholly inappropriate at a time like this.

Something that's going to get me into a world of trouble if I don't put it out right this instant.

Jasha thumbs through my phone, checking everything that's there and probably discovering the poorly disguised texts to Diego from the Cartel. I can tell by his expression that I'm in serious trouble, but I won't know how much until we get to wherever we're going.

They said something about a house?

At least it's not a jail cell, but I can't be too hopeful just yet. They don't sound like they have any intention of letting me go.

Ever.

I'm starting to hate Eddy for getting me wrapped up in this. The drug business is a dangerous game, and I'm not at all prepared to play it, especially not with the Cartel. Eddy wasn't either, it seems, and that's why he got snatched up and held for ransom.

Idiot. He could've lived his life as a moderately successful mechanic, and he wouldn't have had to endure being beaten and recorded on a shitty cellphone camera, begging for his life.

The video is still vivid in my mind. He barely even looked like Eddy, and I could tell they'd been starving him. His eyes were so sunken into his head that it felt like they would disappear entirely if he blinked too hard.

I wonder if he regrets this. He must, and he probably feels terrible about the Cartel forcing me to bring the drugs he stole back to them, but no amount of ill feeling is going to change this. If I ever get out alive, assuming he does too, I'm going to slap him so hard he won't know which direction the border is anymore.

"Diego?" Jasha asks, jarring me out of my thoughts as he pushes the phone into my face. "Is that your contact with the Cartel?"

I nod. There's no point in hiding anything now.

“And Eddy, that’s your cousin,” he says, scrolling through the messages.

“Yes, Eddy is my cousin, and as you can see, all I’m trying to do is get him back. He doesn’t deserve this.”

Jasha rolls his eyes, dropping back into his seat. “Anyone who’s stupid enough to steal drugs from the Cartel deserves to be thrown in an asylum at the very least. It’s probably for the greater good of the United States that the Cartel has him. He’s an idiot.”

“You’re a fucking prick,” I snarl.

He smirks. “I’m just being honest with you.”

“Enough with the honesty until we get to the house,” Nikolai snaps. “I don’t want you bothering her anymore.

“You got a crush on her or something?”

“Shut up,” he growls, his voice plummeting to a guttural, animalistic tone. “Before I break every bone in your goddamn body.”

His words send another wave of chills through my body, a clear warning of his power and influence. He’s the one in charge, and although I’m certain Jasha is capable of terrible things, I know if I were to anger him, Nikolai would show me Hell itself.

Jasha is aware of this too, shrinking down in his seat and grumbling something in Russian as the car slows down.

The SUV takes a sudden turn onto a dirt road, and I’m thrown against the door. Nikolai continues driving with his eyes locked to the road, a silent fury swirling underneath the surface of his stoic face.

The landscape becomes greener as we approach a large iron gate, golden flowers blooming to either side of the car, and I realize the Bratva isn’t anything like the Cartel. These two brothers are filthy rich, and the exterior of their mansion alone tells me their wealth far exceeds what people like Diego could ever dream of having.

Eddy should’ve robbed these assholes instead.

As we stop at the gate, two guards come out of the booth beside it, dressed in suits with machine guns hanging across their chests. They're expressionless until Nikolai rolls down his window, and then they smile, the gate opening like magic the second they've confirmed it's their boss coming home.

Jasha turns to me, his voice dripping with menace. "Welcome to your new home, at least until we decide what to do with you."

I swallow hard, looking at the imposing structure, realizing that my fate is now entirely in their hands. The place looks more like a fortress than a home, and I have a sinking feeling that once I'm inside, there's no getting out.

"You cooperate, and maybe, just maybe, we'll let you live," Nikolai says, his voice void of emotion. "But cross us, lie to us, and you won't live to regret it."

"What did I tell you?" Nikolai asks as we pull up in front of the house.

Jasha shrugs. "I already forgot."

Nikolai shoves the gear selector into Park so hard that I'm surprised it doesn't shatter in his powerful hand. The entire car falls silent, and for several long seconds, nothing happens. Everyone is still, awaiting Nikolai's next move.

Finally, he nods to Jasha, the doors come open, and we enter the Bratva's mansion.

Nikolai

Jasha knows not to bother me as he hauls the duffle bag full of P50 down the hallway, finally leaving me alone with Dream. He's probably just excited to have someone new in the house to talk to, but his inability to keep his mouth shut is getting on my nerves. I need to find out what this woman's deal is before revealing too much about our motives.

I keep a firm grip on Dream's arm as I lead her down the hall to one of the many unoccupied rooms in the house.

When Jasha and I inherited this house from our father, we assumed we'd fill the rooms easily – big beds for all our guests, pool tables, hot tubs, a couple of libraries. Unfortunately, we've had little time to do anything but work since we moved in, and it's almost a bit embarrassing as I pull Dream into one of the rooms and she realizes it's totally empty. Not a single piece of torture equipment in sight.

No worries. She'll soon discover that I don't need whips and cuffs to intimidate her. I'm fully capable of doing that with nothing but my body.

I push her into the center of the room, and she stumbles as she finds her footing on the dusty wooden floor. I stand in front of the door, my arms crossed across my chest as I gauge her reaction.

She's terrified, but it's not the kind of terror a Cartel member would be

feeling right now. They'd know they were about to experience pain like no other. Dream just looks like she fears being yelled at.

I allow an oppressive silence to settle into the room, one that I only break when she opens her mouth to make more excuses for herself.

"Take off your clothes," I demand.

She frowns, folding her arms over her chest and taking a step back. "I'm not hiding anything."

"Then you wouldn't have an issue showing me," I reply, my eyes sweeping over her body. I doubt she'd have anything dangerous on her, but the phone call attempt was enough to make me more thorough.

She relents a little, letting her arms down but making a face like I've annoyed her.

Oh, my dear, I'm going to do much more than that if you don't start respecting my authority.

I step toward her, flicking my finger at her t-shirt. "Take that off."

She obeys quickly but clenches her jaw to maintain her defiant look as she peels her t-shirt off over her head. She tosses it to the floor, pursing her lips as my eyes explore her newly uncovered skin.

She's not wearing a bra, and her nipples grow hard the moment I look at them. I can see the goosebumps forming on her skin, and I suspect she likes this more than she's letting on.

The body doesn't lie. I bet she's soaking wet just as much as she's burning hot with rage and embarrassment right now. It's a shame that she hates me so much. In another life, I'd be buying her purses and having her drain my balls daily.

Regardless, she's undeniably beautiful, and I find myself believing her story just because of that. A Cartel whore wouldn't be this attractive, and certainly not in the natural, effortless way that Dream is. She's too good for this world, and obviously doesn't belong here.

Not with men who would steal her from a world of rules and safety.

Men who would feel no guilt for tarnishing her purity.

Men like...

Me.

“Are you done staring at my tits?” she asks, and I find myself having to tear my eyes away from her to form a coherent sentence.

“You’re a feisty one,” I grumble.

“And you’re a horrible person,” she retorts.

I take a step toward her, long and intentional, and she immediately falls silent. It seems she’s only confident in short bursts, when she somehow thinks she has the upper hand and can get away with talking down to me.

Well, she’ll learn something very quickly here in the Bratva.

Nobody ever talks down to Nikolai Antonov.

I look down at Dream, meeting her bright blue eyes with an unwavering gaze, drilling down deep into her soul to find the last speck of defiance there and crush it to dust. She lasts longer than I expect her to, keeping her eyes open until they start to water. Only then does she look away.

I lean back, humming a small sound of satisfaction. “Take your pants off too. I want to make sure you’re not hiding anything there.”

She’s slow to obey this time, unzipping her jeans like she’s moving through cold syrup. When she pulls them down, my heart skips a beat. Her pale thighs are thick and ample, curving around the most perfect little mound, barely hidden behind the sheer fabric of light-pink panties.

Was she really about to wear that to meet with the Cartel?

She’s lucky I found her first.

“I trust you don’t have anything hidden anywhere else,” I say as I grab her jeans off the floor and fish through the pockets. The fabric is still warm from her skin, and I can smell her scent on them.

My cock tugs at my pants, and it’s not the first time this has happened in her

presence.

“I told you already that I wasn’t hiding anything,” she says, the attitude in her words still palpable despite the way I stared her down.

My hand finds a small wad of cash in the back pocket of her jeans, but nothing else. Her purse was left in the car, but that’s being towed to the house by one of my men. I’ll have all her stuff in a little while, but in the meantime, she’s going through some pretty serious questioning so that I can verify her story.

I toss her pants to the floor and hold up the cash she brought with her. It’s a few hundred dollars, which might be a lot to her, but I have socks that cost more than that.

“You see this?” I ask, waving the cash in front of her face. “How much of this do you think that P50 in your trunk was worth?”

“Ten thousand dollars,” she answers confidently.

I laugh. “Jesus, you’ve really been duped, haven’t you?”

She frowns. “That’s what Diego said. I told you that I was just doing this for my cousin. I don’t know anything about all this shit, and quite honestly, I don’t want to.”

“Too late,” I snap, crumpling up the money and flinging it at her.

She flinches as it hits her tits and flutters down to the floor, and I lean in. “That P50, the Protodafinil you were trafficking, how much was it? The weight. I want the weight.”

“I was told that it was ten kilograms.”

“Okay, so let’s do the math, shall we? A kilogram of Protodafinil can be sold in batches of a hundred grams to dealers for about twenty-thousand dollars each. Multiply that by ten, and then ten again, and how much money do you think you were bringing across the border to the Cartel?”

She pauses, blinking a few times as she does the math in her head. I’m confident she’ll be too nervous to do it, but then I’m surprised when she gives me the correct answer. “Two million dollars,” she says softly.

I point to the money at her feet. “That’s you in comparison to what you were trafficking. Nothing. You’re worthless in the grand scheme of things, and the Cartel wouldn’t even consider keeping you alive once they got what they wanted from you. So, either you’re incredibly stupid, or you’re one of them and just pretending to be stupid.”

“I’m not with them, but I’m not...”

“Not what? You’re not stupid? You really think that? You are the stupidest person I’ve ever met, and I’ve met some pretty braindead morons in my life.”

Her blue eyes are already glistening with tears, but I’m not done with her yet. I grab her jeans and shove them into her arms. “Put your clothes back on and come with me. There’s something I want you to see.”

She sniffs, trying so hard to keep the composure that I’m certain I’ll break once she sees what I’m about to show her. It’s going to shatter her soul, but for her own sake, she must see it. She needs to know what she’s gotten herself into.

Dream

While I'm relieved that Nikolai didn't make me get totally naked in front of him and kill me with embarrassment, I still don't trust him to preserve my dignity. For one, there's a massive erection in his pants that he hasn't tried to hide, and to make matters worse, he's leading me down into the depths of his mansion to show me something that he insists is going to 'fuck my head up' for a long time.

I'm not too keen on seeing whatever it is he has in store for me, but he doesn't give me the option to say no. Instead, he leads me past a door with a big black padlock on it and sits me down in front of a computer.

This wasn't what I was expecting.

The leather in the chair smells like his cologne, rich and spicy, and I'm drawn to the conclusion that this is his office. There's a distinct lack of windows, and it's a bit dark, but it seems like the kind of place a man this serious would want to hang out.

I can't see Jasha working in this place, though. He seems like more the type to open his laptop on a woman's back while he's fucking her from behind. I hate that I can see him so clearly in my head doing that.

"This isn't going to be like anything you've seen before," Nikolai says, leaning over the chair to turn his computer on. His shoulder brushes against

mine, and the warmth of his body is like a glowing orange stove coil. I'd pull away if it wasn't so wickedly arousing.

The computer screen turns on with a pale glow, and he types in a password too quickly for me to see. Part of me really wants to know what he's about to show me, as though it's some kind of important Bratva secret, but it can't be that secret if he's showing it to a woman he's just met.

In all reality, it's probably something I don't want to see, but he adjusts my chair and demands that I watch as he opens a video and presses play.

In the video, there's a naked man lying at the bottom of a pit in the sand. He has a blindfold over his eyes, but he quickly removes it shouting something and trying to climb out of the pit, only to be kicked back in by whoever is holding the camera.

At first, I think it's someone about to be buried alive, but as the video continues, it becomes much worse than that. The ground beneath him is moving, and I realize he's been tossed into a pit full of snakes.

"Those are rattlesnakes," Nikolai says, his voice thick and grim. "The Cartel is cruel but creative."

I try to look away, but he grabs my head and forces me to continue watching. His fingers dig into my ears and neck, but I barely feel them as my focus is drawn to the video again.

"You see what they're doing to him?" Nikolai asks. "How many times do you think he's been bitten already? How long do you think it takes for him to finally die and for his suffering to end?"

The video on the screen keeps getting worse as the man struggles to free himself, quickly losing energy as the snakes wrap around him, striking him over and over as the cameraman records without remorse.

"Why are you showing me this?" I ask, finally able to look at him without him turning my head back to the screen.

"I'm showing you what Jasha and I just saved you from," he says, pulling a cigar from a box beside me on the desk. He lights it, and his face is lit up by orange light before being obscured by thick smoke. "Actually, they would do

worse to you, since you're a woman. Falling into our hands is the best things that's happened to you since you decided to save your stupid little cousin from the Cartel."

I feel a surge of desperation at the mention of Eddy. Even if the drugs are gone and I'm in the hands of the Bratva now, I still need to save him. I'll do anything to make sure that he doesn't befall the same fate as the poor soul in the video Nikolai just showed me.

"Please," I say, grabbing at Nikolai's shirt. "Eddy might've been stupid, but he doesn't deserve this. He's not like those Cartel guys. He was just trying to make some quick money, and he screwed up. We all make mistakes."

Nikolai shakes his head, but I sense a flicker of empathy under his cold expression, some warmth in his deep green eyes. "He's probably already dead," he says softly.

"No," I blurt, jumping up from the chair. "He's not. I saw a video of him just this morning. He was in a rough condition, but he was alive. You can check my phone."

"The Cartel lies all the time," Nikolai says, waving his hand in the air dismissively. "Don't get your hopes up about him."

White-hot anger swells in my chest, and I'm emboldened once again to challenge Nikolai. "I'm not giving up on Eddy," I say, projecting my voice as much as I can with how tight my throat is.

Nikolai studies me for a moment, puffing on his cigar until the room turns cloudy and it's difficult to breathe. I can't read him at all, but something about his unwillingness to say anything yet leads me to believe he's taking me seriously.

Finally, he takes the cigar out of his mouth and sighs. "Let's go to the lounge and talk about Eddy's involvement with the Cartel. Perhaps there's something to be gained from all this."

"You mean you'll help me get him back?" I ask, unable to hide the excitement in my voice. It's gushing out as the dam of my emotion breaks, releasing all my pent-up anxiety on this unsuspecting Bratva boss. He's probably used to people breaking down in front of him, but probably not like

I am, not with this much hopeful desperation.

“Calm down,” he says, taking a step back as I start to cry. “I didn’t say I would help you. I just want to know about Eddy.”

“I’ll tell you everything,” I insist between sobs. “Just please, help me. Help *him*. I don’t even care what you do to me.”

He takes a few more puffs of his cigar, probably trying to distract himself from how awkward our juxtaposition of demeanors is. “Stop crying. I don’t want Jasha thinking I’ve hurt you. He’s an asshole, but like myself, he doesn’t approve of hurting innocent women.”

I pull myself together as best as I can, wiping my tears with the back of my hand. My heart is racing, and I can feel a headache starting to throb behind my eyes, but I need to be strong now. I have a story to tell, and making sure I paint myself and Eddy in the best possible light is crucial in obtaining Nikolai’s help.

Or at the very least, his mercy.

“Fine,” I say, my voice hoarse but determined. “Let’s talk about Eddy, but after that, I need you to help me get him back.”

Nikolai raises an eyebrow, and I can see a hint of amusement in his eyes. “You’re in no position to negotiate,” he says, and there’s a softness in his tone that wasn’t there before. “But I am curious to know how your cousin got involved with the Cartel.”

He crushes his cigar in a crystal ashtray, the red embers turning grey, and he motions for me to follow him. As we walk towards the lounge, I feel like I’ve achieved my first small victory in my journey to save Eddy. If the police won’t help me, and the Cartel only wants to use me, then maybe the Bratva is my final option.

The lounge is a stark contrast to his office. Plush velvet couches, handwoven rugs, and deep mahogany tables give the room a feeling of luxury that borders on overindulgence. I feel more comfortable here, but only because I doubt Nikolai would want to ruin this place by spilling blood on the floor.

Nikolai pours himself a glass of whiskey from a crystal decanter and offers

me one as well. I decline it. My head hurts enough already, and I find that as the years go by, hangovers hit me harder and sooner.

Jasha is absent, and I'm thankful that Nikolai isn't involving him in my casual interrogation. I'm sure Nikolai likes him because he's his brother, but I'm not fond of him making jokes at my expense.

Nikolai sits down on one of the couches across from me, his eyes never leaving mine, as if he's trying to see straight into my soul. "Now, tell me everything," he says.

I take a deep breath before I begin, trying to gather up the jumble of details that lays scattered in my memory. I figure it's better to start from the beginning, the very beginning, when I first met Eddy. I want Nikolai to know that he's always been a good man, despite his recent involvement with the Cartel.

"When I was fourteen, my parents were murdered by gang members," I begin, trying not to sound like I'm milking my past for pity. I doubt I'll get any from Nikolai, anyway.

But, to my surprise, he bows his head an inch and blinks slowly. "I'm sorry."

"It feels like forever ago," I admit, "so I'm not bothered by it anymore. It's just that once I was out there on my own, Eddy was the only person who prevented me from being taken up by the state. He adopted me and treated me like a little sister, even though he was just starting out in life himself. He had to play every role in my life – father, brother, friend. He even supported me when I went to college, giving me money for books and other things I needed."

"Sounds like a good man."

"He is," I say, "but there was always something in him, something that drove him to do better. He worked his ass off for very little in return, and I think eventually, he got frustrated with it and started working as a mechanic. There, he did much better, but I guess it still wasn't enough. I don't really know how or why he got mixed up with the Cartel, but I can assure you, he only did it for some quick money. He's not one of them. He's not cruel like that."

Nikolai purses his lips. "Quick money to the tune of a few million dollars."

“Maybe he thought it was worth the risk,” I say, still struggling to figure out why the hell he would do it in the first place. To me, no amount of money would cause me to risk my life like that. It’s only family that brought me this far, and even that might’ve been a mistake.

Nikolai takes a sip of his whiskey, swirling it around in the glass and staring at it for an uncomfortably long time. “Foolish, but perhaps useful.”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

He puts his glass down on the coffee table and leans forward, clasping his large hands together. His voice comes out quietly, with a deep rasp. “It’s time for me to tell you a story of my own.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as a deep frown creases his forehead, and he lowers his voice even further. “I’ve had my fair share of run-ins with the Cartel. That man in the video, for instance, was a member of my Bratva. He was on patrol near the border, making sure that none of the guys from the Dimalona Cartel – the ones you’re dealing with – were able to slip by our border crossing point without permission. We own that little twenty-mile strip of the border, but we’ve had issues with them since the United States Border Patrol exposed their major crossing point and shut down nearly eighty percent of their drug smuggling operation.”

He snaps his fingers with a loud pop. “Just like that. Now, they’re so desperate that they’ll kill to get across the border again. They took one of our guys and sent a video of him to us as a threat, but that only succeeded in pissing me off. The Antonov Family will not stand for intimidation tactics.”

My heart sinks as I realize the type of grudge he must have against the Cartel. Getting involved with them, even if it was for a noble end, was a mistake. It’s tainted me in his eyes, and it will be difficult to redeem myself.

But Nikolai doesn’t look at me with disgust. Instead, his eyes soften, and he leans back. “Your cousin probably knows a lot more than I do about what’s going on in the Cartel. He could be useful to us if we get him back, perhaps even priceless if he’s able to give us enough information to bring them down for good.”

I don’t know whether to laugh or to cry, so I do neither, crossing my legs and

wringing my hands to keep my emotions contained. “So, you’re going to help me?” I ask.

He pauses for a long time again, looking into his glass as though he’s going to find the answer there.

Finally, he looks up at me and nods. “Yes. We’re going to get Eddy back.”

Nikolai

“**S**tay at the house and keep your phone on so that I can call you. Don’t get wasted. Don’t have women over. This is some serious shit I’m getting into, and if I need your help, you need to be able to act on a moment’s notice.”

Jasha looks at me like I’ve lost my mind. “You’re really going to Mexico with that girl?”

I toss my jacket over my shoulder, giving him a smug grin. “Are you jealous or something?”

He rolls his eyes. “Come on, man. You could’ve at least invited me. I’m not going to get anything useful done at the house by myself.”

“That’s the point. Wait for me. That’s all I need.”

“And you trust that Dream isn’t going to squeal?”

“Maybe in my bed,” I reply.

He tries not to laugh but fails, releasing a short chuckle before growing serious again. “Okay, I walked into that one. But seriously, can we trust her?”

I peek out the door at Dream sitting in the passenger’s seat of my car with her hands folded on her lap. If she wanted to escape, now would be a good time,

but she hasn't tried anything.

I lower my voice, leaning in toward Jasha. "Listen, she's completely obsessed with finding her cousin and rescuing him from the Cartel. She doesn't want anything else. In fact, I'm almost certain she'd be more likely to run into Cartel gunfire than go to the police and risk losing our support. She needs us, and we could stand to learn a thing or two from her cousin."

Jasha sighs, still not totally convinced, but I know he's not going to stop me. "Just be safe," he says, pulling me into an embrace.

I pat him on his back. "I'll bring you back a souvenir or something."

"Maybe the severed head of that fucker who killed Luka," he says as he pulls away.

"Maybe all of their heads."

He laughs, and all is well between us.

Jasha watches us at the door as we pull out onto the road leading past the gate and onto the main road. Only once we've passed the gate do I see him step inside from the rearview mirror of my plain white sedan. Then, the house disappears, and we're on our way to Mexico.

Dream is silent for a while, playing with the edges of her pockets until something sparks her curiosity and she looks over to me. "Have you already texted Diego?"

"No, I was going to have you do that. It should be in your voice," I reply. "But wait a bit before you do that. We don't want them to know you ran into any delays until we're already across the border."

"Why is that?" she asks.

"They'll be more comfortable with the delay if they're confident you made it past the border. Else, they might think you're being followed," I reply, rehashing the plan in my head. It's not the best one, but it's all we have.

The Cartel can't know about me, nor can they suspect that Dream's plans have changed in the slightest. All they need to believe is that she was stopped at the border for longer than expected, she made it through, and now she's

continuing on her way to Dimalona, Mexico.

Dream shifts in her seat, her nerves starting to get the better of her as we get close to where I pulled her over earlier today. She must think that there are other Border Patrol agents here, real ones, but there aren't. This is Bratva territory, and they know better than to get involved.

"It's all clear from here on, as long as you know where to cross," I explain, hoping to calm her down. "The road splits off into four different routes, but only one is through the part of the border controlled by my Bratva. That one might look a little different, but I can assure you, it's the correct way."

She looks at me, but quickly looks away when my eyes shift to her. "I just don't want to see any snakes," he mutters.

"Oh, the only snake you're going to see is the one in my pants," I say, grabbing my cock through my jeans and squeezing it.

She wrinkles her nose and pulls so far back that she's at risk of opening the door by accident and falling out. "Don't do that. This is serious."

"I am being serious," I insist with a playful grin. "If you're afraid of snakes, you might want to learn how to charm them. I heard the snake charmers use their tongue."

Her pretty face turns to a soured glare. "I don't find you the least bit funny."

"No?" I ask, pretending to be offended.

"Not at all," she snaps. "You're not a comedian by any stretch of the imagination."

I raise an eyebrow, smirking at her artificial outrage. "Oh, I see. You prefer your men serious and brooding, then? Well, my dear, I can be serious, but I've noticed you don't like that side of me either."

"I don't like *any* side of you," she retorts.

"Not even the side of me that's willing to help you find your dear cousin?"

"Oh please," she huffs, crossing her arms. "You're only in this for yourself. I'm not even sure you really care about Eddy at all, honestly. Maybe you're

just in it because I'm pretty and you think you can get something from me."

Admittedly, I'm a pervert, but not that much of one that I would risk my life just to get some pussy. Dream might be beautiful, but she might not be worth fucking if I have to deal with her attitude afterward. It gives me a headache.

"I'm not interested in you, actually," I say, trying to take her down a notch. She seems to think that being pretty is a superpower, but out here, the only thing that holds any power at all is clean water and cold, hard cash.

I get a scoff and a roll of the eyes from my passenger princess. "Good," she says, "because I hate everything you stand for."

"And yet, you want my help. You're going to have to be a bit more convincing if you really want me to believe that you hate me. I just think you're covering from the fact that you can't keep your eyes off me. It's embarrassing for you, babe."

She tries to look annoyed but fails as the corner of her mouth twitches. "Don't call me babe. I'm not your babe."

"Yet," I mutter.

"What did you say?" she asks, her voice rising almost a full octave.

"I said, you're not my babe *yet*."

"You have got to be the most conceited man I've ever met," she says, her brown curls dancing on her head like angry snakes. "Do you know that?"

I chuckle, enjoying getting her worked up more than I should. "It's part of my charm. If you think this is bad, wait until we're stuck together at the hotel with nothing to do but argue all night. You might just fall in love with me."

She snorts. "Fall in love with you? Please. I'm immune to your so called 'charm.'"

"Or angry sex. I hear uptight women like you really enjoy that."

"Would you please just shut up and drive the car? Do you even know where we are?"

"I know exactly where we are," I reply, but I have to look down the road to

figure out if we've passed the final ten-mile marker to the intersection yet.

"I'm starting to regret this," she says, sliding down in her seat.

"We can turn around," I suggest, veering slightly out of my lane to show my intention of turning around.

"Turn it around then, idiot. I know you won't. You want Eddy just as much as I do," she replies flatly.

I raise one hand from the steering wheel. "You keep talking like that to me and you're going to get a spanking."

"You wouldn't dare."

"No?"

"No."

I slam my foot into the brake so hard that our seatbelts lock out and we screech to a stop diagonally in the road. It doesn't bother me because there's nobody else out here. It's just me and this rude little woman who's about to be taught a very important lesson.

Joking around is one thing, but insulting me to my face and then challenging my authority is another thing entirely.

Dream looks instantly regretful once she realizes I'm not kidding around this time, but it's too late for her to walk back her statements. Besides, I think she's secretly enjoying this. She wants to see how far she can push me before I snap.

Not very far, apparently. I have a short temper.

"Get out of the car," I growl.

"You're serious?" she says, curling up in her seat. "I don't want to be left out here in the desert."

"I'm not going to leave you behind. I'm going to spank you."

"Seriously?" she asks, as though my statement were just another joke.

I unbuckle my seatbelt and open my door. “I’m very serious. Pull your pants down and let me see your ass. Do it now.”

She climbs out of the car after me, her voice thin and whiney. “But someone could see!”

It’s funny that her problem isn’t with being spanked, it’s with someone seeing it happen. More confirmation that she’s silently begging me to do it to her, egging me on until I lose control.

That kind of behavior will get her in trouble, especially once we’re at our hotel for the night. That’s when the people go to sleep and the monsters come out to play.

Dream runs a lap around the car as I come after her, shrieking when I double back and she plows right into my arms. I grab her, picking her up and putting her down under the shade of the car.

She laughs as she tries to kick my shins. This woman is a straight-up demon, but I know how to handle her. If she wants to play around like that, she’s going to have to come to terms with losing.

Dream

Suddenly, the man towering above me turns from my worst nightmare to my greatest fantasy, his wicked scowl transforming into a handsome concentrated expression as he pulls my pants to my ankles and puts me on all fours on the hot asphalt.

It's just warm enough to be uncomfortable, but not enough to burn me, and honestly, that just adds to my excitement. It's a much-needed distraction from the horrible peril that my life has become, and I try not to think about how fucked up my life must be if getting spanked by a Bratva boss in the middle of a public road starts to sound like a good idea.

"Too pale," Nikolai grumbles from above me, sliding his hand over my ass. "We should change that."

I yelp in surprise as his hand comes down on my ass, but that surprise is coupled with an immediate rush of arousal to my pussy that makes me confused about my feelings for Nikolai. His attractiveness is undeniable, but I feel like my body is betraying me by becoming so impossibly horny from just one spanking.

No man has ever done that, but then again, no man has ever dared spank me until now.

Nikolai doesn't play by the rules, and he makes it so nobody wins but him.

“Need another one?” he asks.

I squint through the sun as I look back at him, seeing his hand pulled back and ready to go. Before I can stop myself, the words escape from my lips. “Yes.”

He spans me again, lower this time, like he’s trying to touch my pussy but doesn’t want to make it too obvious. If I let him, I would be nothing better than the whore he probably already believes me to be.

And I hate him too much to give him that kind of satisfaction.

“That’s enough,” I say, jumping up as he pulls his hand back again. “We’re done with this nonsense.”

“Have you learned your lesson?” he asks, grinning playfully.

I want to punch him. “The only thing I learned is that you’re just as much of an asshole as I thought you were. Maybe even more.”

“Hmm, I was under the impression that you enjoyed it. I’m pretty sure I heard a moan.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. I’ve had guys much better than you’ll ever be,” I lie as I button my pants. “And twice as rich.”

He laughs as we get back into the car. “But you haven’t even had me yet.”

“And I never will.”

But it’s too late to ruin his ego. I’ve already fed it until it was bursting at the seams, and he won’t stop smiling. I can almost see how big his head has gotten as we continue on our way.

“Stop it,” I say.

“Stop what?” he asks like he doesn’t know what he’s doing.

“Stop smiling like that.”

“I can’t be happy?” he asks, drumming his finger on the steering wheel with tangible delight.

I take a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh. “My cousin was kidnapped by the Cartel, we’re heading straight into their territory with two million dollars’ worth of drugs in the back of the car, and we’re probably not going to last a day in Dimalona without being thrown into a pit of rattlesnakes. So no, I don’t think it’s such a great idea to be happy.”

He shrugs.

He just fucking shrugs.

“Not a big deal,” he replies, but his smile does fade a bit. “I’ve been through some pretty treacherous events in my life, and all of my appendages are still intact. If you want me to prove it, I can show you my –”

I hold my hand up to stop him. “No. Please, just no. I don’t want to see anything, or know anything, or experience anything, or do anything...”

“Your loss,” he replies, shooting me a smug look before focusing back on the road.

No, it’s not my loss. It’s his loss, because if he was a bit more of a gentleman and a lot less conceited, I might actually consider letting my attraction to him get the better of me. As it stands, however, the chances of him getting anything more than that stupid spanking out of me are slim to none.

And I still can’t believe I even let him do that to begin with. I was looking for a distraction and I found one, but I need to keep my wits about me from now on. Nikolai will take what he can get, and I highly doubt he’s the type to cuddle afterward. He’d probably toss me a twenty and kick me to the curb.

I hate men like him. When I was eighteen and still a clueless freshman in college, I became captivated by an Italian guy who played on the lacrosse team. We’re talking over six feet of lean, suntanned muscle, and the kind of stamina that would have you losing track of how many orgasms you’ve had.

That’s what I imagined him to be like, anyway. I never got to find out because after he was finished fucking every girl in my dorm building, he skipped over me and told me to my face that he didn’t want to sleep with me because I was, in his words, ‘just too ugly.’

In retrospect, he wasn’t nearly as attractive or muscular as the man sitting in

the driver's seat beside me, but I did learn my lesson that day – don't become infatuated with assholes. And even though Nikolai might not think that I'm ugly, especially since he's made it very clear that he wants to get in my pants, I know that I can't trust him.

It's not about getting my feelings hurt. It's about having my bleeding heart ripped out of my chest and stomped into the ground. Men like Nikolai and that dumb Italian jock can speed run a bad relationship like it's a quick game of lacrosse on a Saturday afternoon.

Now I have to ask if Nikolai has ever played lacrosse. If he has, I might just jump out of this car and walk the rest of the way to Mexico.

"Lacrosse? That's a weird question," he says once I find the courage to bring it up.

"I mean, you must be playing some kind of sport, right? You're certainly fit. I thought rich people played lacrosse," I say, trying not to reveal the real reason for my question. "You seem like a bit of a jock."

Nikolai flexes his biceps, displaying a bulge bigger than my head. I wish his body wasn't so fucking perfect. I'm going to lose my mind.

"I'm not into sports," he says. "Jasha and I have a gym at home that we use every morning, but the last time either of us played sports was on our little street back in Russia. We made up this game where we'd throw rocks at empty beer bottles, and you'd get points dependent how far you scattered the glass. We were probably about twelve years old at the time."

"Oh," I say, not quite sure what to make of his story. It's surprisingly humble. "So, you weren't raised by rich parents or anything?"

He laughs. "No, our family was so poor that Jasha and I would eat the snow outside in the winter and pretend it was ice cream. It was only later when we moved to the United States that we realized most criminals here were making a lot of money even though they were dumber than cinder blocks. We figured if they could do it, we could do it better, so we did."

"And now you're rich."

"And now, *we're* rich. Jasha and I share everything."

“Even women?” I ask without thinking.

He looks at me, his face drawing down into a serious look that’s almost frightening. “No. I’m a very possessive man. That’s where we draw the line.”

My heart races as his gaze lingers, and I find myself wondering just how jealous of a man he’d be if we were dating. He doesn’t have to know, and it would never happen, but I entertain the thought because it’s something to think about. It’s a long car ride. I can’t be blamed for finding something weird to fill the time.

I sit with my thoughts for a long minute before he speaks again.

“And you? Any sports?”

I’m relieved by the innocence of his question. “I used to play volleyball during my senior year of college, but nothing since then. I should probably do something to keep myself from getting too chubby.”

“You’re not chubby,” he says, looking at me with a confused frown.

“No, but I’m not, like, skinny either,” I say, pinching the fat around my thighs.

“You’re perfect,” he says, looking bothered that I would make a comment about my own appearance. “Everybody is built differently, and I think you’re exactly how you should be.”

I’m taken aback by the intensity of his statement. He’s not wrong, but I’m surprised how adamant he is about something so nice. It betrays his rude nature.

“Well, thank you,” I say softly.

“I’m just being honest,” he says, gripping the steering wheel a little lighter. “I feel like women are so needlessly hard on themselves about their appearances.”

I laugh. “Are you some kind of feminist or something?”

He gives me a look of annoyance. “I can be meaner if you want.”

“Please do. This is almost making me forget how much of an asshole you

usually are.”

He smirks, but he doesn't follow it up with anything mean. He just allows the car to fall into silence again, leaving me to process the new emotions that are tearing up my insides like a tornado unleashed on a town built with toothpicks.

I *shouldn't* like him.

I *should* hate him.

But he's growing on me, and I don't know what to do about it.

Nikolai

We pass the intersection with ease, pulling up to what would be a border wall if there wasn't a hole the size of three large trucks cut into the side of it. At either side of this haphazard opening, Bratva guards stand in the sun. Their job is to verify legitimate crossings and gun down Cartel members who dare use our route to transport their drugs.

Dream is visibly nervous as we're stopped by the guards, but she quickly realizes there's nothing to fear as we're waved through at the sight of my face. Everyone around here knows who I am, and they respect my authority.

It seems like the only person who fails to fall in line is Dream. She immediately jumps into questioning mode the moment we're in Mexico, demanding to know how long it's going to take to get to the hotel, how soon we can eat dinner, and if she should text her Cartel contact Diego yet or wait for him to reach out first.

I'm not in the mood for all these questions, of course, but I answer them the best that I can. I'd rather her be satisfied than repeat them over and over until I lose my cool. We know what happened last time, and I doubt she'd let me pull over and spank her now that we're back in a well-populated area.

That'll have to wait until we're at our hotel.

"So, you really are the big boss, huh," Dream says, leaning back in her seat as

we leave the border far behind us.

“I told you that already.”

“Well, you’ve lied to me before, so I need clear confirmation of things before I believe you now.”

I frown, trying hard to figure out what she’s talking about. “I’ve never lied to you.”

When I look over at her, I see a goofy grin spreading quickly across her face. “You lied about being charming,” she says.

“Ah, so we’re back to being happy and playful,” I say, a bit annoyed but also relieved that she was only joking. “I thought you wanted me to be more serious.”

She shrugs, looking out the window at the sprawling greenery. There are mountains in the distance, but here, it’s sunny, flat, and green. “I don’t know, it kind of feels like we’re on vacation a bit. I’ve never been to Mexico before.”

“Don’t get too comfortable,” I warn.

“You think the Cartel is out here?” she asks, looking around doubtfully.

“They’re everywhere,” I reply, though that’s not entirely true. I just don’t want her running off and getting herself into trouble. The last thing I need is a dead American woman on my hands. The authorities would come down on my ass so hard that I’d be limping my way to prison.

Plus, Jasha would be pissed. I promised to bring him some mezcal with a worm in the bottle. He’s fascinated by weird things like that, but I’ll admit I’d also like to try it. It’s supposed to make the drink taste better.

I can’t really do any of that if I’m locked up in Mexico.

“I’m pretty sure there’s nobody out here, not even the Cartel. Where even are we?” Dream asks, leaning forward to get a better look around.

“On the way to Mapimi. Our hotel is close to there,” I reply.

Tonight, we’re staying at an unnamed hotel slightly south of Mapimi. I’m

known in this city because my guys often pass through it if we need to go deeper into Mexico for a pickup. It happens a few times a year, but that's often enough for the owner to give my guys free lodging in exchange for keeping the Cartel away.

In truth, I don't think the Cartel wants to be all the way out there, anyway, but the owner of the hotel doesn't have to know that. Peace of mind is what he's looking for, and that's exactly what he gets from the Bratva.

"Mapimi... Never heard of it," Dream mutters. "Why couldn't we go somewhere with more people?"

"Are you looking for your cousin or are you trying to spend all your time at a beach resort instead?"

She groans. "Obviously, my cousin, but I don't feel safe out here. Bad things happen in small towns."

"I hate to break it to you, babe, but bad things happen everywhere."

"I told you not to call me that," she snaps, which seems to be her response every time I put her in a difficult position. She changes the subject, and somehow, I'm always the one who's in the wrong.

"What I call you doesn't matter if you die, and the fact of the matter is, you're far more likely to get killed in the city than all the way out here. The Cartel doesn't touch this place. That's why we're staying here," I say, no longer in the mood for her attitude, however playful it might be. I suspect it isn't.

She scoffs, folding her arms and falling back into silence for a minute before springing back into conversation. "So, Diego hasn't texted me yet. I'm starting to think he's waiting for me to go first."

I sigh. "You can text him, but remember what we talked about. You're only going to tell him the bare minimum, and you're not going to mention anything about me. You have the drugs, there was a slight delay, but you're arriving Friday."

"You think he's going to be angry that I was supposed to be there on Thursday?"

“Diego is just your contact. He doesn’t care at all, and he’s not in charge of your cousin’s fate. That’s someone else’s call to make, but we’re not showing up in Dimalona in the middle of the night to meet with the Cartel. It’s either broad daylight or never.”

“I don’t like how you’re treating this,” she replies, pulling out her phone. “Eddy’s life is on the line. We can’t take risks with these people.”

“They’re used to negotiating. They expect it, and the fact that you haven’t is probably more suspicious to them than anything. Trust me, I’ve dealt with these guys before.”

“Yeah, and someone from your Bratva got eaten alive by snakes as a result. You’re a real trustworthy guy,” she replies, her words drenched with sarcasm as she finishes up her message and sends it.

My grip tightens on the steering wheel as I glance at her, a mix of frustration and admiration for her boldness building within me. “I guess I *am* a real charmer, then, if I can get you to trust me even after you saw that video.”

“I never said I trusted you. That was sarcasm,” Dream fires back, her eyes locking with mine, challenging me once again. “I’m here because I have no other choice, and you’re helping me because you want the same thing as me – Eddy.”

I soften, realizing the pressure she’s under. “We’ll get Eddy back.”

She looks away, her lips pursed, and I know that my words aren’t enough to console her.

We drive for a while, the only sound keeping us from being in complete silence being the engine of the car and the crackle of the dirt road beneath us.

The landscape outside changes, the flat terrain giving way to slight hills and scattered clusters of trees. I feel like Dream is looking at me again, but when I glance over, she’s staring out the window, lost in thought.

“You never answered my question about dinner,” she finally says, breaking the silence. Her tone is lighter now, teasing. This is becoming a cycle. “Do we at least get to eat at this mysterious hotel you’re taking us to?”

“I think we can manage some food,” I reply, “But don’t expect anything fancy.”

We continue our drive, the conversation flowing more easily now, drifting from food to music to the absurdity of the situation we’re in. We even argue about the worm in the mezcal bottle, and I can’t help but feel a connection growing between us, a bond formed out of this unusual journey.

We’re just two people who were ever supposed to meet, and now we’re stuck in a car together in Mexico, heading toward a very strong possibility of death while arguing about worms and alcohol.

But as we pull up to the hotel, a plain, unmarked building nestled in a town that feels abandoned, I can feel the tension return. The moment of fun together is over, and the reality of our mission comes crashing back down.

“We’re here,” I say, my voice suddenly serious.

Dream looks at the hotel, her eyes wide. “This is it?”

“Yes. This is it.”

“God, I hope this is a joke. There’s not even a sign on the door or anything. How are you supposed to tell they’re open for business?”

I put the car into park and turn to her. “You’re not. Listen, this is normally a place for my guys to stop on long trips. So just relax, try to smile, and whatever you do, don’t mention the Cartel. The owner is terrified of them.”

She groans as I open my door. “I hope you got us two separate rooms, at least.”

I grin. “Nope. One room, and only one little bed.”

Dream

Any hope that I had that Nikolai was joking about the bed bursts into a ball of flames when he opens the old wooden door to our hotel room, and I see a little bed with a metal frame sitting in the dead center of the room. There's nothing else but a dresser and the door to what I assume to be the bathroom.

"Nikolai," I say, gritting my teeth as he closes the door behind us. "What the fuck is this?"

"Our room," he replies, tossing the key onto the dresser and slipping out of his shoes.

"I thought you were rich. Why are we staying in the ghetto?" I ask, keeping my voice barely above a whisper so that the owner doesn't hear me. He seemed like a nice guy, but this place is depressing. I wonder how he even makes enough to keep it open.

"I told you to relax," he says, undoing the top button of his shirt. "I know the owner and he's a good guy. We're staying here because I don't want to risk being seen by someone from the Cartel."

"Well, I hope you didn't pay much for it," I say, shaking my head as I look around. It's hot in here, and there's no sign of an A/C unit.

"I don't pay anything, actually. The Bratva just helps keep the criminals out

of town.”

“Ironic, because you are one,” I reply, walking over to the window and pulling it open. Hot air rushes in, making the situation even worse. I close it immediately, turning around to face Nikolai with my hands on my hips. “We’re going to cook in here.”

“The shower is cold,” he replies, undoing another button on his shirt. “You can take one if you get too hot. Or just take off your clothes. You’re probably hot because of those jeans.”

My gaze is drawn to the tattoos on his broad chest, and I almost forget to be angry about all this.

I wouldn’t dare get naked in front of him again, though, especially not after what happened on the way here. If he was willing to spank me in public, I can only imagine what he’d do to me behind closed doors.

I try not to look at him as he takes his shirt off completely, revealing abs that look like they were carved from stone, with deep gutters to either side of them that lead into the thick viper coiled in his pants.

The heat in the room grows, or maybe it’s just the burning in my cheeks.

A cold shower does sound nice right about now.

I turn away from Nikolai as he thumbs open the button on his pants. “What are you doing?” I ask, trying not to sound like I’m panicking.

“It’s been a long drive. I’m getting in the shower, unless you want to get in first.”

“No, that’s fine. You go right ahead,” I reply, staring hard at the window until I can see the outline of his perfect body in the reflection. My curiosity is getting the better of me, but as long as he doesn’t know I’m stealing a glance, it can’t get me in trouble.

“I won’t be long,” he says, stepping out of his pants and tossing them onto the bed. “Maybe you want to join me.”

I shake my head so hard that my brain hurts. “No, definitely not,” I say, but inside my body is screaming at me to jump in and witness his flawless

physicality up close and personal. We're going to be sharing a bed, anyway.

"Suit yourself," he says, his voice floating away toward the bathroom. "But if you change your mind, you know where to find me."

I watch his reflection disappear into the bathroom, and I let out the breath I was holding. I can barely think when he's in the same room as me, and when he's peeling off his clothes without any shame at all, I'm surprised I'm able to speak at all.

I cross my arms, trying not to notice how hard my nipples are as I walk over to the bed and push his pants off onto the floor. It's an excuse to touch them, but he'll think I'm just being a bitch.

Good. I don't want him to know how he makes me feel. He would take advantage of that, and the last thing I need is more guilt hanging over my head about screwing a Bratva boss when Eddy's life is in danger.

I sit down on the bed, crossing my arms tighter as I listen to the shower turning on and Nikolai humming to himself happily as he steps inside. How can he be so relaxed when there's so much at stake?

Sure, he doesn't have the same emotional ties to Eddy as I do, but his wellbeing is on the line as well as two million dollars' worth of drugs.

If he is nervous, he doesn't show it. Maybe this is just another day in the life of a Bratva boss for him. I'm not sure whether to be comforted or worried by that.

"Oh God!" I exclaim as I'm snapped out of my thoughts by a very naked man walking back into the room.

"Sorry to bother you. I forgot my towel," Nikolai says, walking past me to the bag he brought in from the car when we first arrived.

"Couldn't you have covered up a bit before you walked out here?" I ask, covering my eyes only enough to give him the impression that I can no longer see him. In reality, I'm peeking through the cracks between my fingers like window blinds.

"Not really, since my towel is in the bag," he replies, but I know he could've

put his underwear back on, at least. I can see his bare ass as he bends over, and I hate that it's so small and round. It's almost cute.

"Stop walking so slowly," I say, waving him on to the bathroom as he takes painfully slow steps past me.

"If you're in such a rush, maybe you should just hop in with me," he replies with a chuckle.

"In your dreams."

"You're right, babe. You will be in my dreams, and I'm sure I'll also be in my... Dream."

"Very funny," I reply flatly, "but I've heard it all before. The dumb jokes, the play on my name. It's pretty overdone."

"I haven't had my turn yet, and I wouldn't miss that kind of opportunity," he says with a wink as he disappears into the bathroom again.

I want to throw something at him, but there's nothing in this barren room that I could throw. I'm trapped with a monster whose ego is twice the size of the country he's from, and I'm without a weapon.

I'm starting to wonder whether Nikolai has some gun tucked in his bag somewhere when he comes out of the bathroom again, dripping wet this time, but still very naked.

I groan. "Are you just going to keep doing that? What happened to your towel?"

"Too hot in here. I'd prefer to air dry," he says, doing a quick spin and flinging droplets of water all over me.

"Okay, you really need to stop that," I say, jumping up from the bed. "I'm going to get in the shower, and by the time I come out, you'd better have put some clothes on."

He shrugs his impossibly wide shoulders, grinning as he does another quick spin. "Don't bet on it."

God, he's so goofy. How did he even manage to become a Bratva boss in the

first place?

I rush into the bathroom, shutting and locking the door so that I can block him from bothering me any further. What I can't shut out, though, is the mental image I have of his family jewels hanging down long between his muscular thighs.

I heard a cold shower is supposed to help rid you of filthy thoughts, but in this case, I doubt it. Nothing is going to stop me from running back through the last few minutes of Nikolai's nudity in my head until I melt into a pathetically horny puddle in the shower and disappear down the drain.

I can smell Nikolai in the shower when I step in. It's like he's here with me.

But I forget about him for a moment as the showerhead shudders and cold water comes gushing out like a breaking dam. I take a sharp breath in through my teeth, but quickly adjust to the cold as it washes over my flushed and tired body.

Today has been an exhausting day, both mentally and physically, and I'm just glad that I get a moment to relax before I have to return to the real world.

And Nikolai.

There he is again, invading my thoughts, and I'm letting him do it. It's not like he has the key to my brain. He can't just invite himself in and refuse to leave. I have to allow him to stay there, and if he's not paying rent, I need to work up the courage to kick him out.

But rent payments come in other forms than just money, and the Nikolai in my head is paying them by crawling up between my thighs and putting his hot mouth right on my pussy. I'd make him eat me out until he couldn't breathe, and then I'd be the one tossing him to the side in favor of the next intriguing toy who'd walk my way.

I smirk, but I know that Nikolai would flip the power dynamic on me so fast that my head would spin. He has a knack for doing that, and that's why I don't even dare consider actually letting any of my fantasies become reality.

He'd like that too much, and he'd find a way to ruin it for me. I'm certain he would.

After a solid half hour under the water, I'm confident that Nikolai has had enough time to dry off and put something on, even if it's just a pair of underwear. So, I turn the water off, towel off, and realize right then and there that I didn't bring a change of clothes.

Shit.

Nikolai

A small voice from the far side of the room catches my attention. “Hey,” Dream says, poking her head out of the bathroom.

I look over to her, and I’m nearly stunned by how pretty she looks with her hair all wet and dark like that. She has the towel I brought wrapped around her body, and it’s only just long enough to cover the parts of her she’d rather die than show me.

That’s a shame. I should’ve cut it in half before we came here.

“What’s up?” I ask, sitting up under the thin white bedsheets to get a better look at her.

“Um, this is going to sound dumb, but I didn’t bring any clothes with me. Do you have something I can borrow?”

“Like what?” I ask, unable to hide a smile as it creeps onto my face.

“Stop smiling. I just want some pajamas or something.”

“Sorry. Don’t have any.”

She frowns. “Then what are you wearing?”

“Nothing.”

She runs the palm of her hand across her forehead and groans. “I’m not sleeping in the bed with you if you’re going to be naked. At least *one* of us has to wear something.”

“You’re welcome to wear one of my shirts,” I say, leaning in a bit further to get a better look at her.

Jesus, she’s so beautiful, and I doubt she even realizes it. I’d do anything to see what’s under that towel, to have her lay down in bed with me and allow me to take my time exploring every inch of her body.

“Okay, give me a shirt,” she says, waiting at the door.

“You want me to get out of bed and get it for you?” I ask, moving the cover away from my body until she can see my bare leg.

“No, stop that. I’ll get it. I’m assuming it’s in your bag,” she says, charging into the room with a firm grip on her towel.

I watch her closely as she squats down in front of my bag, trying to prevent me from seeing her ass. I’m curious if it’s still red from the spanking, still sensitive to the touch. I almost want to jump out of bed and give it another whack, but I think she might actually kill me if I did that. There’s a gun in my bag, so it’s not outside the realm of possibilities.

She stands up, holding a plain white button-down shirt in one hand and gripping her towel like it’s about to fall off her body with the other. “I’ll wear this one,” she says softly.

“You’re welcome to it.”

She lingers next to the bag for a moment, as though she’s not sure what to do, and then she goes back into the bathroom to get ready for bed.

I ease back into my lumpy pillow and stare at the ceiling, making shapes in my imagination from the irregular texture of the paint and trying to keep my mind off the things that bother me. I know we’re safe here, but every creak and groan from the old building makes me want to jump out of bed and face some invisible threat. I’ve never been this anxious, though I know how to hide it to maintain the illusion of total control.

In reality, nothing is completely in a man’s control. Sometimes, a woman throws him off and ruins everything for him.

A woman like Dream.

As much as I secretly adore her, I’m still concerned by how distracting she is. That could get me in trouble, and I know better than to fall for someone who enjoys playing games and undermining me. I’ve experienced it all before, and I’d be a fool to let it happen again.

Jasha sometimes calls me crazy because of my inability to commit to a woman for longer than one night, but he’s the same way. We’ve lived our lives in parallel since birth. We both came into this world poor and desperate,

we both worked our asses off to become rich, and then we both got stabbed in the back by women who only wanted to use us for money.

Now, emotionally damaged and unwilling to seek help for it, neither of us can settle.

Dream is as her name implies – just a dream. She can never be the woman I stay with forever, because that woman doesn't exist. I know better than to even consider that I could be wrong, and I won't let fleeting curiosity and attraction cloud my judgment.

I'm sure once she gets Eddy back, she's not going to want to have anything to do with criminals like me anymore, anyway. She's already sick of the Cartel, and I'm sure she'll be sick of the Bratva once we're done here.

I've almost convinced myself that I hate her when she walks back into the room wearing nothing but my shirt and nearly causes me to fall out of bed. "Make some room in there," she says, walking over to the light switch.

I'm stunned into inaction, my eyes drawn to her pale, silky legs, following them up to her thighs. The length of my shirt on her body teases me with what it refuses to reveal. The fabric is thin and loose, and if it were pressed against her body, it would reveal everything.

And I'd probably lose my mind.

She turns off the light before I have the opportunity to see more, cloaking herself in darkness as she approaches the bed. I move over for her, but not enough to give her the space she requires to sleep. If she wants that, she's going to have to take it from me.

She slides into the bed, immediately realizing that she doesn't have enough space. "Move," she urges, putting her hand on my side and pushing gently.

I close my eyes, reveling in the softness of her small hand on my bare skin. I want more of it. I want her all over me, pressing her softness into the heat of my body until neither of us can tell where one body ends and the other begins.

"I said move," she repeats, a little more forcefully this time.

“You’re going to have to make me,” I mumble, praying for both of her hands on me this time and not just a punch to the groin.

Her hand lingers on my side, and I feel her lean closer to me, her breath warm on my skin. “Don’t test me,” she whispers.

Her proximity is intoxicating. Every nerve in my body is alert and alive, wanting nothing more than to grab her and pull her into me. I resist, but only barely. There’s something about this game between us, this tension that neither of us wants to give in to.

“I’m not testing you, Dream,” I say, my voice low and unwavering. “The bed is just small.”

“Too small,” she says, but she removes her hand and slides into bed beside me. “We need to sleep. We have a long day ahead of us tomorrow.”

I know she’s right, but I don’t care about tomorrow. I care about the way her skin feels against mine as she settles in beside me.

“We’ll sleep,” I whisper, moving my leg over hers. “Just let me get comfortable.”

She stiffens. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s not.” Her words are meant to be firm, but they tremble slightly, betraying her and revealing what she’s really feeling. She moves just the smallest bit closer to me, her shirt riding up her thighs and the bare skin of her hip touching mine.

I take a deep breath, inhaling the light scent of her body and becoming intoxicated by it. All the money in the world can’t buy a woman like Dream. She’s so far removed from my lifestyle that I’d never be able to find anyone else like her.

The fact that she’s with me now is a freak accident that I’m certain the universe will correct as soon as it can. She’ll slip through my fingers and be lost forever like she was never really there to begin with.

I lift my hand, moving it to her face and stopping short so she doesn’t slap

me. She can see it in the darkness. I know because her bright blue eyes are so wide that they threaten to swallow me whole.

Her wet curls cascade down the pillow, resting lightly on her shoulders. I pluck one up from the bunch and bounce it in the air between us. "Cute."

"I don't need you touching me like that," she says, her words coming out with much less aggression than before.

"What about like this?" I ask, reaching out and brushing the back of my hand against her cheek. It's burning hot.

She doesn't say anything, but she pulls her head back.

"You're afraid," I say, not as an accusation but as an observation.

"I'm not afraid of anything you could do to me," she replies, and it sounds more like a challenge than a rejection.

I lean in, slowly closing the distance between our lips. I'm giving her time to pull away again, but she doesn't.

Our lips touch, softly at first, then with more urgency. A spark ignites, a connection greater than either of us expected. Our kiss deepens, becomes something more, something raw and primal.

I feel the heat in my chest, the burning need to do much more, to take everything she has and spoil her with money in return. That's what they all want from me, anyway, so that's what I'd give to her.

My heart, however, can never leave my possession.

As though she senses my intentions, she breaks away from the kiss, her breath ragged and her body trembling. "No," she whispers. "We can't."

I don't say anything. I don't need to. The frustration in her voice finishes this argument before it even begins.

"We need to sleep," she says, her voice stronger now.

I move over, finally giving her the space she needs, but it feels like defeat.

We lie there in the dark, the silence between us heavy and charged. I can hear

her breathing, can feel the warmth of her body close to mine, but she feels miles away.

I close my eyes and try to sleep, but it comes slowly. Frustration chews at my insides, a reminder that I should never have even tried. It wouldn't end well because I'm meant to be alone.

Soon, I hear her snoring gently beside me, and it takes everything in me not to turn around and pull her close.

We're here together, but I've never felt so alone.

Dream

“Diego wants to delay the meeting,” I say, holding out my phone. “He says he’s worried that I’ve been followed.”

“What?! Let me see that,” Nikolai replies, dashing across the room and taking the phone out of my hand. He holds it close to his face, his vivid green eyes darting over messages. “What a fucking idiot. Border Patrol doesn’t follow people all the way into Mexico. Nobody is coming after you or the drugs.”

I sigh. “Yeah, well, that’s what he said. He wants me to come to Dimalona on Monday.”

“Weren’t you originally supposed to be there on Thursday? Now Friday is somehow too early for them?” He counts the days on his fingers before handing the phone back to me. “Alright, it’s only a couple more days. Tell him it’s fine.”

“A couple more days could be too much for Eddy,” I reply, my stomach twisting up at the thought of abandoning him for any longer than necessary.

“Don’t arouse suspicion,” he snaps. “Just agree to it, and we’ll make sure to fuck them up good once Eddy is delivered to us. Diego, and whoever else is involved in this is going to pay.”

“I just want Eddy back. I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

Nikolai grins, pulling a gun from his bag and tucking it into the front of his pants. “Yeah, but I do.”

My breath hitches in my throat. “I thought we were staying here for today?”

“We are,” he replies, putting his shirt on and thumbing the buttons in place.

I narrow my eyes. “And you said the Cartel doesn’t hang out around here.”

“You can never be too careful,” he replies in a nonchalant manner. “Don’t let the gun get to you. It’s for your protection just as much as mine.”

I feel like there’s something he’s not telling me, but with the way he likes to

play with my feelings and skirt around the truth, I doubt I'd be able to figure out what it is before I go crazy. It's better to leave it alone and allow him to take the lead for now.

"So, you think we could get some food?" I ask, my stomach grumbling as I realize we skipped out on dinner last night.

"I was just about to suggest that," he says, smoothing back his hair in front of a cracked mirror. "I hope you like Mexican."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, not much of a choice out here, is there?"

"I mean, once we arrive in one of the major cities, there will be all the typical garbage you Americans enjoy, but for now, you're stuck with the authentic stuff," he replies, looking over his shoulder and winking at me.

If I could die from annoyance, I'd already be rotting into the floorboards by now. I don't understand how Nikolai can drive me into such a frustrated state, making me want to slap him and kiss him at the same time.

Maybe that's what I should've done last night. The kiss wasn't enough because he's still on his worst behavior.

"So, let's go," I say, grabbing my dirty jeans off the floor and climbing into them. "I also need something clean to wear."

"There's a market about half a mile down the road that'll have clothes," he says, cupping his hand against his neck and running it over the stubble that grew overnight. "I might need to find a barber shop later."

"You brought a gun but not a razor?" I ask, trying to find any little thing to fault him for.

"You shouldn't bring knives to gunfights," he replies, patting the obvious outline of a gun in his waistband. "You ready?"

"One second." I pull off the shirt I took from his bag last night and replace it with the sour-smelling one I wore on the drive here. I didn't realize how much I had been sweating in this heat until now, and I doubt extra deodorant is going to be enough to counteract that.

I definitely need something else to wear, but maybe this will keep Nikolai

away from me. I have to look on the bright side.

Speaking of bright, the sun is blazing up in the sky with such hostility that I can practically hear it as we step outside. I blink in the searing light as Nikolai walks in front of me with so much poise and direction that I'm certain he's cheating the sun somehow, and he isn't even wearing sunglasses.

"Jesus, is it always this bright outside?" I ask, stumbling along behind him as he makes a beeline for the closest restaurant. "How can you see?"

"I have my eyes surgically tinted by the Russian government back in '98," he replies casually.

I stop a moment to process what he just said, but run after him again when I realize he's pulling my leg. "Okay, very funny. You're just full of jokes, aren't you? I thought a Bratva boss would be a bit more serious, especially at a time like this. You're acting like a high school jock."

He spins around on his heels and I bounce off his chest, nearly falling to the ground. "The only thing I'm serious about is you not mentioning that I'm a Bratva boss. As much power as it gives me at the hotel, not everyone around here is as keen to have a criminal in their backyard. They might see killing me as an opportunity to gain favor and mercy from the Cartel. I'd rather be a jock than a Bratva boss out here."

I hadn't thought of that, but I can't see Nikolai as anything but an obvious criminal. He's covered from head to toe in tattoos, and he's about twice the size of a normal man. He wouldn't be able to hide his Bratva affiliation if he dressed up in a tutu and started teaching ballet.

"And you're guilty by association," he adds. "So don't think you can get rid of me and come out of here alive. They'd gut you without a second thought."

As it turns out, I was right when I said that bad things happen in small towns. I don't trust this place. For one, there's nobody here, and that's weird enough, but if Nikolai feels the need to walk around with a gun in his pants and hush me when I mention he's with the Bratva, there's no way we're somewhere that's truly safe.

I stand by what I said before. A big city would've been safer. We could've disappeared there. Here, we stick out like tourists, only the type people want

to kill instead of rob.

“Breakfast is good here,” Nikolai says, pointing to another unlabeled building in a sea of unlabeled buildings. It seems that everyone just knows where everything is already, and they don’t need signs.

“Are you sure there’s even anyone in there?” I ask as we walk up to the door.

“I know the place. Really good food. You’ll see,” he says, pulling the door open.

I’m surprised when we walk in and discover that it’s buzzing as much as lunch hour at my favorite taco place in the United States. We almost have to wait for a table, but someone vacates one as we walk through the building, and we quickly slide into either side of the booth.

The waiter doesn’t give us menus. Apparently, there’s only one breakfast option, and I have to settle for that. I watch the other patrons, noting how they dig into plates filled with various types of meat, eggs, beans, and tortillas. I’m glad I’m not a vegetarian.

Now that we’re seated, I can smell myself again, and the odor is nothing pleasant.

“Tell me about this clothing store,” I say, leaning back to keep some distance between Nikolai and myself. I feel like he’s going to make fun of me if he realizes how bad I smell.

Or maybe I just don’t want him to think I’m gross. I shouldn’t, though. I don’t need his validation.

“It’s an outdoor market, so you should drink plenty of water with breakfast. If you think it’s hot now, wait until we get outside again and start walking around,” he replies, playing with a little piece of a discarded straw wrapper on the table.

It kind of feels like we’re on a date.

“So, they’ll have something casual there? Something... typical?” I ask, trying to figure out how to say I just want jeans and a t-shirt without implying that the locals here don’t know how to dress.

I mean, they do know how to dress, but that's just it. They all seem to be wearing dresses, and I'm afraid if I did, Nikolai wouldn't be able to stop himself from reaching under it and grabbing my –

“They have lots of options. Probably stuff similar to what you're wearing now.”

“And that's fine here?” I ask, looking down at my wrinkly t-shirt and jeans tinted orange from the dirt.

“You look great,” he says, flicking the straw wrapper onto my side of the table.

“I just want to blend in and feel safe. That's all,” I reply, flicking the little piece of paper back to him. “I don't want people to know what we're here to do.”

“Smuggling drugs in exchange for your cousin's life,” he adds, his voice low, almost like he's savoring the words. “I hope it's as thrilling as it sounds.”

“Thrilling is one word for it,” I mutter, glancing over at a waiter carrying identical plates and then back at him. “Terrifying would be another.”

His expression softens, and he reaches across the table, taking my hand. “I won't let anything happen to you, Dream. You're safe with me.”

His touch sends a jolt up my arm, and I stare at our hands, so different in size yet they fit together like they were made to. There's a sincerity in his eyes that makes it hard for me not to believe him.

I pull my hand away, more from fear of my own feelings than anything else. “Let's just eat and go to the market. I'll feel better once I'm wearing something clean again.”

He nods, leaning back and looking at me with a thoughtful expression.

Our breakfast arrives, and we eat in relative silence. The food is delicious and filling, and I find myself picking things off of Nikolai's plate after scraping mine clean. He lets me do it. That's how I know he has a soft spot for me.

Soon, we find ourselves walking down the dusty road again, the sun high and burning even hotter than before. The market Nikolai takes us to is bustling

with a surprising number of people.

The city is no longer abandoned. It's brimming with life.

I weave through the stalls, feeling somewhat out of place because of my obvious American appearance. Nikolai follows closely, his eyes scanning the crowd as if expecting trouble at any moment.

"Relax," I tell him, stopping to look at a rack of dresses. "We're just shopping."

He grins, the tension in his shoulders easing slightly. "I never thought I'd see the day when I'd be out shopping for clothes with a beautiful woman. Jasha would be calling me a pussy right about now."

"And he's not here, so you can drop the macho act and help me pick something out. I thought you said there would be jeans and stuff here," I say, looking at table after table of colorful dresses. They're cute, but I just know they're going to get me in trouble.

"I'm sure you could find jeans in a different store, but you would probably be cooler in a dress," he says.

I shrug. Maybe he's right.

Nikolai moves closer to me, his eyes scanning the table in front of us until he settles on something so short that I'm pretty sure it's not even a dress. It must be a shirt or something, but he points to it and nods his head. "That's a nice dress, don't you think?"

I take it, holding it up to my body to show him how impossibly short it would be. I don't say anything, instead waiting for him to see what's wrong and apologize.

Apparently, that's far too much to ask of a man like Nikolai.

"Wow, beautiful," he says, rubbing his chin. "I really like that color on you. Blue brings out the brightness of your eyes."

I can't help but smile at his words. "Yeah, but you see what's wrong with it, though?"

He pouts a bit, studying the dress for a moment longer. “No, it looks fine to me.”

“Nikolai, it’s way too short,” I finally say, pulling it away from my body and setting it back down on the table. “Let’s find something a bit more modest.”

To my surprise, he agrees with me, but not for the reason I was expecting. “You’re right,” he says. “I wouldn’t want other men to stare at you. I’d have to beat them up, and that would end up being more trouble than it’s worth.”

Is that the possessiveness he spoke about yesterday? If so, I could get used to that. Nobody else has ever cared what I wore, and that included past boyfriends. They barely even acknowledged that we were dating at all.

I’m not even dating Nikolai, and he’s acting like I’m his girlfriend. I know I shouldn’t even pretend that we’re official, but when we’re out here without anyone from my hometown to see or judge me, it feels like we could be a real couple.

And if only for these next few days, I wouldn’t mind playing pretend with him.

We continue to browse the dresses, and I manage to find a few that meet both my and Nikolai’s approval. As we head back to our temporary home, bags in hand, I can’t help but feel a renewed sense of hope.

Maybe, with Nikolai by my side, I can save Eddy and get my life back. And then, one day in the far future, I’ll look back at this and see it as nothing more than a wild adventure with a few fiery kisses in the dark.

Nikolai

We stay in the hotel for the rest of the day, and I'm forced to watch Dream go from smiling and excited to huffy and irritable again. I know she hates being locked up inside all day, but there's nothing good that will come from hanging around outside all day. Someone is bound to notice that we're not locals, and if the Cartel catches a whiff of what's really going on, they're going to slit Eddy's throat and call the whole thing off.

And that's only if they don't come here and kill us both first. They still want their drugs, and I'd have to be crazy to believe they wouldn't come and take them by force if they had to.

Dream races around in the room in her dress, humming angrily under her breath as she makes another lap around the bed. The bottom of her dress keeps coming up just a few inches before her ass, and I'm tempted each time to take a peek underneath it.

I close my eyes as she comes around again. She's been doing this for the past hour and a half, and I'm teetering between the idea of locking her in the bathroom or throwing her over the bed and finding out once and for all what's under her dress.

Both feel like good ideas at this point, which is ridiculous because neither of them would bring us any closer to rescuing Eddy. They'd probably just make things more difficult, creating unneeded tension between Dream and me.

The problem is, there's already tension between us, and I don't have to do a damn thing to keep it building. It's doing that on its own as Dream continues to walk circles around me, putting me into a trance with her exposed legs.

My cock aches in my pants, and it's starting to genuinely hurt having an erection this long. They tell you that you should see a doctor if you pop a pill and have an erection lasting longer than a few hours, but this thing has been throbbing in my pants all day.

If I die, I'm blaming it on Dream.

She makes another lap around the bed, and I reach out and flick my fingers at the bottom of her skirt, lifting it up just a bit. She pretends not to notice, doing another lap around the bed, so I flick it up again, more this time.

A little flash of white panties, and I'm caught red-handed.

"What the fuck are you doing?" she asks, swiping my hand away as she comes to a stop.

I shrug. "Just passing the time, same as you."

"You're really immature. I hope you know that," she says, her expression changing drastically when her eyes wander down to my lap and she sees how large my erection is. "Um, I don't want to see that. I know you're doing that on purpose."

"I can assure you that I'm not. Men don't have control over their erections," I reply, brushing my hand over my lap. "It's entirely *your* fault."

She wrinkles her nose at me, but I can see a spark of interest in her eyes. "Can't you just... adjust it or something? Does it have to be sticking out like that?"

"The only thing that's going to fix this is if you get on your knees and suck me off," I reply, unable to control my words anymore. My dick is doing all the talking, and it doesn't seem to care whether I get in trouble for it.

"I'm not doing that," she says, shaking her head. "You can take care of yourself."

An idea sparks way back in my subconscious mind, working its way into my consciousness and then immediately into my words. "Maybe I should take care of myself. Then we could both just relax," I say, rubbing my hand over the bulge in my pants. "Fuck, I really need to get off. I'd really lose control if I didn't."

It's hot in the room, but I see goosebumps appear on her arms. She crosses them, frowning slightly as her cheeks turn red. "Yes, maybe that's for the better. Just get it over with quickly so you don't end up doing anything stupid."

“Right,” I say, watching her face closely as I sit up on the edge of the bed and undo my belt. I pull my gun out and set it beside me, but her eyes are focused on one thing and one thing only – my erection.

I unzip my pants and pull them down, but she still doesn’t move. Is she really going to watch me as I cum all over the floor in front of her? I’ve never been watched before, admittedly, and it’s turning me on more than it should.

I don’t question her intentions. That would ruin the moment and probably have her running off the bathroom to hide until I finish.

No, I want to keep her here. I want her to see what she does to me when she’s walking around in that little dress she picked out today. She should know that she not only makes me frustrated beyond words, but also hopelessly aroused.

As I pull down my underwear and my cock revels in its newfound freedom, it grows even bigger, matching the way Dream’s pupils are growing as she stares at it with an open mouth.

God, what I’d do to have her mouth on my cock right now.

But I don’t want to rush it. One wrong move, and she’s bound to leave me with blue balls.

I grab my cock, trying to meet her eyes but failing as she becomes fixated on what I’m doing with my hand. She can’t look away, and she doesn’t blink. She just stands there, her breath caught in her throat and her words stolen from her as I jerk off on the edge of our bed.

I get a rush from her watching me, a crackling electric pulse that flows through me every time I think about what I’m doing. It heightens my pleasure, causing my cock to swell in my hand until it’s aching for immediate release.

Sweat grows on my hairline, and I feel the energy in the room shift. I stiffen, watching how Dream arching her back ever so slightly, signaling her approval as I begin to climax.

Her body reacts to my orgasm, her mouth opening a little wider and her weight shifting so that she’s leaning closer to me as I pump my white-hot seed across the floor at her feet. I push my hips out, trying to get some onto

her and succeeded when it splashes across her toes.

She flinches but says nothing as I finish, in total awe at what just happened.

I shake my cock, flicking the remainder of my oversized load onto the floor and looking down at it. I never cum this much at once, and my balls are sore from the intensity of my orgasm.

What has this woman done to me?

She clears her throat, pulling my attention back to her. Her mouth is closed now, and she's studying the mess I made at her feet.

"Maybe you should clean that up," I say, a wicked idea forming in my head.

She starts to turn, presumably to get toilet paper from the bathroom, but I'm not finished speaking.

"Not like that," I say, tucking my cock back into my underwear. "With your tongue."

"What?" she asks, her voice barely more than a whisper.

"With. Your. Tongue. Lick it up for me," I say, keeping my voice stern and demanding.

It's a gamble that could end poorly, even as she kneels to the ground and pulls her hair back. She's fully capable of turning on me, scooping up my load and throwing it at me for even suggesting such a filthy thing for her to do, but it's worth the risk. I wouldn't miss a chance to see her taste a part of me, especially when she has to submit so deeply to do it.

She looks up at me as she lowers herself to the ground, as though she expects me to make her stop at the last moment to save her from humiliating herself.

But I'm a cruel man.

I have no intention of preserving her dignity.

So, with nobody to blame for her actions but herself, she willingly sticks out her tongue and tastes the fruits of my pleasure, slurping it straight off the floor in front of me.

“That’s right,” I urge, leaning in to get a closer look. “Get all of it. Drink it all up.”

She hurries to finish the rest of it, licking her lips as she looks away from me in embarrassment. She can no longer meet my eyes, and I’m sure she can hardly believe what she just did.

“Good girl,” I say. “Now, give me a kiss.”

She stands up suddenly, smoothing out her dress and releasing a nervous laugh. “No, I think that’s quite enough.”

“Is it?” I ask, leaning back with a smirk. “You seemed to be enjoying it.”

She shakes her head, her face contorted into a worried expression as though she’s trying to reconcile the woman she *thinks* she is with the hopeless slut who just got down on her knees and lapped up my cum from the floor on command.

That’s who she really is, but I can tell that she hates it.

“We’re not talking about this. Like, ever,” she says, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. She licks her lips again after, like she can’t get enough of the taste.

I shrug. “I won’t say a word about it, but something tells me we’re not finished.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “What do you mean?”

I meet her suspicious gaze with narrow eyes of my own. “I know who you really are now, Dream, and I’m going to have so much fun making you look into the mirror and realize it for yourself.”

“You’re ridiculous,” she says, making her inevitable return to the fiery defiance I’ve come to know and love. “This *never* happened.”

“Whatever you say,” I reply, standing up from the bed and zipping my pants. I walk away from her, going for the door to the room.

“Where are you going?” she blurts.

Without looking over my shoulder, I open the door and walk out into the

hallway. “I’ll be at the bar, telling everyone there what you just did.”

Dream

Oh, I hate him. I really hate that asshole, but I'm starting to hate myself much more.

I hate that I fell for the charm I tried so hard to deny existed, I hate that I kissed him last night, and I hate that I licked his cum off the floor.

Honestly, that's disgusting.

I feel repulsive, and now I have to come to terms with the fact that feeling this way has also left me incredibly horny.

At least he's not here to watch me touch myself while I savor the taste of him that's left in my mouth. I doubt he's actually telling anyone at the bar what we just did. He's just trying to get me worked up, and I'm not going to let him hold this over my head.

He's just as guilty as I am. What kind of man does that to a woman he barely knows?

Moreover, what kind of woman enjoys it?

I'm sitting on the edge of the bed Nikolai once occupied, doing the same thing that he was doing with my back turned to the door. He could come in and see me, and part of me wants him to, but I doubt he's going to have the time to go to the bar and come back before I finish.

When I'm this turned on, it doesn't take long to find that sweet spot and finish myself off quickly. The pleasure bubbles up like a bottle of champagne, and the cork pops like it's been vigorously shaken.

I'm able to forget about Nikolai for just a split second, a few pulsating moments in heaven before I'm cast back down to earth to experience the shame of what I've done.

I pull up my panties once I finish and adjust my dress. As expected, it didn't take long, probably the quickest session I've had, and there's no sign of Nikolai. I feel like we should be bonding over what happened, but he probably felt just as weird about it as I did, and that's why he left almost

immediately afterward.

That could be the end of things. Perhaps we took it too far already, and neither of us dares make another move.

Or it could be the beginning, and if it is, I dread to think what kinds of feelings I'm going to have for him once this trip is finished and Eddy is back home.

I contemplate my feelings for Nikolai, dissecting each emotion, each tingle in my stomach, in the most clinical way I can manage. I get the urge to call someone to confide in, a friend or someone I trust, but I have nobody.

I think Eddy would call me crazy, falling for a Russian mafia boss twice my age.

Well, Eddy, you're not here to talk sense into me, so I'm going to go ahead and allow myself to be senseless.

I look at the floor, at the smudge my lips left on the surface of the wood, and I feel a buzz in my belly again. I shouldn't have enjoyed doing that. Nikolai is an awful man. There's absolutely no reason for me to relish submitting to him like that.

I mean, aside from the fact that he's drop-dead gorgeous.

Just as I'm about to justify myself with some philosophical nonsense about how attraction isn't logical, I hear a loud bang from outside.

A gunshot. There's nothing else it could be, and with Nikolai having left just minutes ago, I have to assume it has something to do with him.

Of course, it does. That idiot can't go one minute without causing some sort of trouble. Whether it's making me look like an overly sexed moron, or literally shooting people outside, Nikolai has a special talent for creating mayhem.

I jump off the bed and make my way toward the door. My hand hovers over the doorknob, hesitating. What if Nikolai is out there? What if he's the one who's been shot? Or what if he's the one who pulled the trigger? Both ideas are terrifying considering that he's the only person who can help me get Eddy

back.

But standing here and doing nothing isn't an option. I brace myself for what's outside, twist the knob, and cautiously open the door. I poke my head out, half-expecting to see blood splattered on the walls like some gruesome horror movie.

But there's nothing.

No blood, no body, no Nikolai. The hallway is totally empty.

Whoever is shooting isn't inside the hotel, but they're close. They have to be. I heard that gunshot loud and clear from the bedroom.

I rush back inside the room, going for the window to get a look outside.

That's when I hear the second gunshot.

And then the third.

Nikolai

It seems like a man can't even enjoy a cold beer nowadays without being shot at by one of the Cartel's spineless opportunists. And the only reason I'm still alive to be mad about it is because they can't aim for shit. Otherwise, this trip would've ended halfway through a pilsner.

I really shouldn't be shooting back, but I can't stand it when someone interrupts me when I'm having a drink. Jasha has done it a time or two, minus the gun, and I nearly shot him on both occasions.

This time, I have a good enough reason to pull the trigger, and I let shots loose in the building as it erupts into chaos. The slight buzz takes some of the stress away, and I shoot better because of it, hitting my attacker on the first shot and finishing him with the second.

He goes down hard, but I doubt I'm in the clear yet. Around here, bar owners don't take kindly to people who put bullets in their customers, even if those customers happen to be the ones who instigated the fight.

I don't waste time getting out of there, tucking my gun into my pants and leaping off my barstool with a half-finished beer in my fist. I take a drink as I run with everyone else toward the door, pretending I wasn't the obvious cause of this mayhem.

"Pendejo!" I hear the owner yell as I leave, but I'm already too far outside to reply with my own insult. My Spanish isn't as polished as it used to be.

Word travels fast in a small town like this, and I suspect that once the locals figure out who attracted the Cartel to their little town, they're going to grab their pitchforks and come after me.

Normally, that wouldn't bother me, but I have Dream to worry about, and she won't be able to face the locals like I would. If she's in danger, we need to leave. I won't have any harm befall her because of my recklessness. I promised to keep her safe and I'm a man of my word.

My shoulder slams against the front entrance of the hotel as I burst inside, charging past the woman at the front desk and up the stairs to the bedroom.

Dream is already out in the hallway, a panicked expression on her face that melts into relief when she sees me.

“What’s going on?” she asks as I rush past her into the room.

“A little scuffle at the bar. Nothing major.” I take a swig of my beer and set it down on the dresser. “We need to pack up and go. The Cartel knows we’re here.”

“Seriously?!”

“Not my fault, babe. That’s just the way things go when you’re prancing around in public, buying dresses when you should be hiding away inside,” I say as I gather our stuff and shove it into my bag.

“I needed clothes. I hardly think that’s my fault. You’re the one who was out drinking in the middle of the day.”

“That’s the least busy time,” I mutter, but I know she’s right. I shouldn’t have gone out. This could’ve been avoided, but I got sloppy and we’re paying the price for it.

What’s worse is that the Cartel is going to get word that there’s a Bratva boss on the loose in Mexico, and if they’re capable of doing math, they’ll put one and one together and realize that Dream and I are in this together.

Eddy might be inheriting more trouble than he already has, and Dream is never going to forgive me if she thinks I’m the one who got him killed.

We have to be preemptive about this. Contacting Diego and requesting a temporary truce in exchange for the drugs is the only way we’re going to be able to pull this off. Dream isn’t going to like it, but we’re already past keeping this operation covert.

It’s time to air some dirty laundry.

I grab my bag in one hand and Dream in the other, yanking her out of the room and down the stairs. The woman at the front desk is scared and bewildered as we rush past her, but I don’t have time for explanations or apologies. Even Dream seems to realize this and doesn’t say anything until we’re in the car.

“You really screwed this up,” she says, slouching in her seat as I pull out onto the road.

“Now isn’t the time,” I grumble, pressing my foot down hard into the accelerator.

“No, now’s a perfect time. You were supposed to take this seriously, and instead, you were out drinking and getting into fights with the Cartel,” she says, her voice rising to match her visible anger.

“That wasn’t my fault,” I insist, unwilling to admit my guilt. I hate being wrong, and I hate it even more when someone else is right. It makes me look weak, and I refuse to show that side of me to a woman again.

She’ll take advantage of me.

That’s what they always do.

Dream doesn’t buy my excuses, shaking her head and breathing out loudly as we barrel down the open road toward the next town. “Where are we going, anyway?” she asks.

“Well, you wanted to go to one of the big cities before, so that’s where we’re going,” I reply, trying to sound like it’s a good thing.

Like it’s her choice.

She sighs. “This is going to get Eddy killed. I knew I couldn’t trust you.”

“Eddy will be fine. We’ll renegotiate through Diego and the Cartel will keep him alive because they want the drugs. They’re not going to give up on two million dollars just because they found out you’re with me,” I explain, though I know there’s still a risk that they’ll kill Eddy. The Cartel can be unpredictable, and they have a grudge against me.

“This is fucked up. I just want Eddy back,” she says, turning from me as tears appear in her eyes. Her voice shakes with emotion. “You promised you would help me. That I’d be safe with you. And now look at where we are, running from one town to the next because of your recklessness!”

Her words strike me like bullets, and I feel a pang of guilt in my chest. The anger in her eyes is overshadowed by fear, and that’s what hurts the most. I

feel like I've failed her even though we've only just started.

"I'm sorry, Dream," I say, my voice softer, my demeanor switching as I realize she's sobbing. "I never meant for any of this to happen. I just... I got careless. You're right. I screwed up."

"You screwed up?" she snaps, turning to me with tears streaming down her cheeks. "I thought you were actually going to help. I really believed that, even though you were an insufferable asshole, you still knew how to get Eddy back. Well, I was wrong."

I look over at her, trying to find the words to make this right, but she's turned away from me again, staring out the window, her shoulders all the way up to her ears. I reach out to touch her arm, but she jerks away.

"Don't," she says coldly.

I withdraw my hand, feeling as though I've been slapped. We drive in silence for a while, the tension in the car palpable. The hum of the engine is the only sound between us, but it does nothing to drown out my guilt.

Finally, I break the silence. "I know I messed up, Dream. But I need you to believe that I would never intentionally put you or Eddy in danger. We're going to talk to the Cartel and make sure they let Eddy go once we deliver the drugs. I know he means a lot to you."

"You don't know shit," she snarls. "You've never met him, and you don't know what he's done for me."

"You told me some things," I reply. "He helped you when you were younger, and..."

"He did more than that. He made it possible for me to go to college. He protected me. He worked so fucking hard for us, and I'm not going to allow you to throw his life away because you want to act like some stupid jock instead of the Bratva boss you're supposed to be. Honestly, I'm disappointed."

Hasn't she called me a jock a few times before already? What's up with that?

"What with you and jocks?" I ask.

She stiffens, and I know I have something to dig into. “What are you talking about?” she asks, her voice thin and high.

Miraculously, her tears have vanished, and she’s looking at me again, trying to act like she has no clue what I’m talking about. She’s so bad at lying that it’s almost funny, but I doubt I’d be able to get away with laughing at a time like this.

“The jock thing,” I repeat. “You keep accusing me of acting like a jock. I suppose you probably thought a Bratva boss would be busy brooding all the time, but I am a human being. I’m allowed to have a sense of humor.”

“You’re just immature.”

“And jocks are immature? Or is this just someone from your past that pissed you off?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?!”

Ah, that’s it. That’s what she’s trying to hide, first by feigning confusion, and now with anger.

“You can’t compare me to other people. I’m not anything like the men you’re used to, and I would like the opportunity to show you that,” I say, trying hard to win back the conversation. Eddy’s predicament might not let me, though. It’s weighing heavy in the air, and I doubt she’ll be in a better mood until we’ve worked something out with the Cartel.

Dream rolls her eyes. “You’re *just* like the other guys. Nobody takes me seriously, and you’re no different.”

“I am taking you seriously. I’m here in Mexico with you, trying to get Eddy. I could’ve taken the drugs and left you on the side of the road in Texas, but I didn’t. Hell, I could’ve left you in town when things got hot, but I haven’t given up. We’re still on this mission together.”

She rolls her tongue around in her mouth, trying to find a reason why I’m wrong, but she relents after a few seconds. “Alright, you’re not the worst man I’ve met. There have been worse. The jock in question was this Italian guy at my school. Fucked everyone but me, and he was an absolute prick about it.”

I laugh, though I know it's not funny to her. "You probably saved yourself from several STDs by being rejected."

"Some good that did me. I probably collected a few from you earlier today," she grumbles, but there's a smile teasing at the corners of her mouth.

"I can assure you that I'm clean. I'm not as much of a playboy as you probably think. I don't spend a lot of time around women these days."

"Oh, believe me, I can tell."

I chuckle. "You're relentless, you know that?"

She shrugs. "If you can't fuck the asshole, might as well become the asshole."

"I've done both."

She looks at me like she can't believe what I just said, her eyes wide and her mouth agape. "I'm going to pretend like you didn't just say that to me. Here I was, thinking you had redeemed yourself."

"All part of the charm."

"All this talk about charm and I've yet to experience any."

"Then what made you lick my cum off the floor back at the hotel," I ask.

There's a heavy moment of silence between us. "I thought we agreed not to talk about that."

"You agreed to. I did no such thing."

"Well, I still don't want to talk about it, so if you could not bring it up, like, ever, I would appreciate that," she says, turning away again.

"No problem. Just don't expect me to let you do it again," I say, seeing if I can get her to laugh.

She remains silent, her face still turned away, but I can see her shoulders have relaxed a bit. I know her well enough to recognize that she's as pissed at me as she was before. She's still worried about Eddy, but we'll get this worked out. I know I owe her at least that much.

We drive for a long time, and by the time we reach a major city that's not crawling with Cartel goons, she's already asleep in the passenger's seat. She's so peaceful when she's not attempting to disassemble my ego.

We pull into a relatively busy hotel, and when I shut off the engine, she wakes up, blinking in her new surroundings. "Where are we?"

"The Red Bird," I say, translating the sign on the building. "Not that far from Dimalona."

"Should we be this close to them?" she asks, looking out the window and around the busy parking lot.

"Hidden in the crowd," I reply with a smile. "Plus, I can hire some local armed security for when we go out. It'll draw more attention to us, but it'll also prevent any one-off attacks from the Cartel. They'll have to get serious if they want the P50 we have."

"I don't want more people. That doesn't make me feel safer."

"What would?" I ask, looking for an honest answer.

"You," she says. "I'd feel safe if you didn't run off again. Obviously, you can take care of yourself, since you're still in one piece after the shooting. I assume you didn't get hit, but I was so caught up in the moment to ask. I'm sorry."

"I'm fine," I assure her, shaking my head. "I'm more concerned about you. And you're right. I won't let you out of my sight again."

She smiles, tucking her head in and reaching for the door handle. "I guess we can go, then. I have to send Diego a message."

"Sure," I say, reaching for the door.

That's when we both hear a buzz.

And it's not my phone.

It's hers.

Dream

My stomach churns when I see Diego's name on my phone. Eddy's both dead and alive until I answer this, and doing so feels like sealing his fate. If Diego is too pissed off at me for bringing Nikolai, he's not even going to bother arguing with me. He's just going to inform me that he's already sliced Eddy's head off, and that I'll be receiving it in the mail in a week or so.

My finger hovers over the decline button, but Nikolai gives me an urging look and I choose to answer the phone. "Hello?" I ask, holding it up to my ear.

"You can't hide things from me," Diego says, his voice thickened by his deep Mexican accent.

"Hiding what?" I ask, knowing it's ballsy but necessary to challenge him. He might know less than he's trying to make it seem.

"We got word there was a rat in our midst, and we think it has something to do with you. Know anything about this?"

I look toward Nikolai, but he just shrugs.

Not very helpful, but part of me appreciates that he's leaving this up to me. I'm the one responsible for getting Eddy out alive.

"Well, I wasn't about to walk into Mexico alone," I say, trying to make it sound like Nikolai is only here to protect me.

There's a long pause from Diego, and I nearly die in the silence waiting for a response. "Okay," he finally says. "I will ask that you don't bring anyone to our meeting in Dimalona. If you want to ensure Eddy's safety, you will listen to me."

"We also have your P50," I reply, looking toward Nikolai for reassurance. He nods, and I continue. "The deal is Eddy's life for the drugs. That's all this is about. Not anyone that I'm with, and not anyone else in your Cartel, which, by the way, attacked us a few hours ago."

“We attacked a Bratva rat,” he growls. “That had nothing to do with you.”

“But it does, and I would appreciate it if you didn’t try anything like that again. You want your drugs, and you’ll get them. Let’s set some ground rules, at least.”

Diego laughs, but I can tell he’s a bit nervous. “Bring the drugs. Nothing else can be promised.”

The line goes dead, and Nikolai lets out a chuckle.

“What’s so funny?” I ask, reaching for the car door to let myself out.

Nikolai gets out of the car with me, shaking his head and smiling like this is all a big joke. “They’re not going to let up. They want to kill us, take the drugs, and probably get rid of Eddy too. The only way we’re going to pull this off is if we ambush them before they can do the same to us.”

“What are you talking about? I just want to make a trade.”

“The rules have changed,” he replies, opening the door to the hotel to me. “But we’ll talk about that in a moment. Let’s get settled in first.”

I want to argue, but for the sake of appearances, I stay silent as we check into the hotel and take our bag up to the room. This one has two beds, but I’m more relieved that it has air conditioning.

Once inside, Nikolai is quick to lock the door, drop his stuff on the floor, and turn to me. “This isn’t going to be how you think it will be,” he says, his voice so grave that goosebumps erupt across my arms and legs.

“What do you mean?” I ask, sitting down on the foot of one of the beds.

“I mean that the Cartel wants me dead more than they care about those drugs or your cousin. They’re going to see this as an opportunity to get me killed, just as much as I see it as an opportunity to get them killed.”

“But why?” I ask, feeling a tightness in my chest as he begins pacing in front of me.

He drums his fingers on his chin, his thick eyebrows pulled together in a formidable scowl. “The border crossing that the Bratva owns is more

valuable than two million dollars. That's the simple truth. They'd rather kill me and claim the territory than take the drugs, but they'll do both if they can."

"So, you're saying... there's no hope for Eddy?" I ask, barely able to get the words out because they're so horrific. My eyes are hot with tears, but I do my best to hold them back. I can't appear weak now. I need to show Nikolai that I can handle whatever comes our way.

"The Cartel are cowards," he replies, shaking his head. "They're not going to risk losing the drugs and the opportunity to kill me by executing your cousin. They'll wait until they have the drugs, and then they'll strike. But they're not going to give Eddy back either way. We'll have to *take* him back, but I already knew that."

"Sounds dangerous," I admit, "but I'm grateful that they're probably going to keep Eddy alive."

"No more dangerous than the Cartel hunting us down and trying to kill us before we even make it to the meeting place in Dimalona," Nikolai replies. "We're going to get your cousin back, but we're not going to do it the way they want us to."

"So... how?" I ask, wondering if he already has a master plan, or he's just making this up on the fly.

He stops pacing and looks at me, his eyes lighting up with a devilish gleam. "I know a guy who might be able to help us, but it's going to be expensive."

I frown, knowing that Nikolai is the only person with any significant amount of money. "How much?"

"Oh, I don't know..." he says, pausing for dramatic effect. "Probably around two million dollars."

"You're joking," I say, knowing full well that he's not.

"On the contrary, I'm dead serious," he says, a smile creeping across his face.

"We're not selling those drugs," I say. "We need them to get Eddy."

"We need brute force to get Eddy. The drugs are just bait. We won't give

them away until we have Eddy,” he explains.

“Why can’t we just use your guys? You must have enough of them to take on the Cartel,” I say. “Or just pay out of pocket. You have enough money. I’ve seen your house.”

“US dollars don’t go very far here, and bringing that much money into the country would be problematic. The drugs are better – small, unassuming, but in very high demand right now. Gabriel will appreciate them.”

“Gabriel?”

“The man with the biggest private army on this side of Mexico,” he says. “And before you ask again, no, I can’t bring my own people. They all have important positions in the United States and pulling them away from the border would put my entire operation at risk. Besides, we need more than a few men. We need dozens of them, and they need to be trained on local soil.”

“You sound like you’re planning a war,” I say, surprised and impressed that he’s able to go to such lengths.

I guess he’s not a stupid jock after all.

“I’ve been looking for an excuse,” he says with a wicked grin. “But I’m going to need to talk to Jasha about it. My brother needs to know that I’m getting involved with Gabriel and taking on the Cartel in a bigger way than we had anticipated.”

“You think he’ll be fine with it?”

“Fine?” he asks with a chuckle. “Jasha’s been trying to convince me to drop a bomb in Dimalona and wipe those bastards out for years now. The only thing he’s not going to be happy about is being left behind while I ‘have all the fun,’” he says, making air quotes with his fingers.

“I’d hardly consider this fun,” I reply, but there’s a little spark of excitement in my belly from doing something this ostentatious. Once again, my dread has been replaced with hope, and I’m amazed at how easily Nikolai was able to make that happen.

Slowly but surely, his position as head of the Russian mafia is starting to

make sense.

“Why don’t you make yourself comfortable, and I’ll get on a phone call with Jasha,” Nikolai suggests, pulling his phone out and punching in a few digits.

I smile, sliding off the bed and not caring in the least when my dress rides up and flashes my panties. Nikolai’s eyes immediately find them, and I can feel them lingering on me as I leave for the bathroom. Even once the door is closed behind me, I can feel the warmth of his eyes on my skin.

Clearly, I haven’t learned my lesson.

Nikolai

I'm almost too distracted to call Jasha, even as Dream disappears into the bathroom to freshen up. It feels like every time she's around, the only thing I can think about is how I'm going to get inside of her.

If she knew what I was thinking, she'd probably question my sanity. Even I'm questioning it as I dial up my brother to tell him what we're about to do.

"You'd better not be in prison," Jasha says the moment he picks up the phone.

"You're not that lucky," I reply, grinning as I sit down on the edge of the bed. "How the fuck are you, man?"

"Pretty much the same as when we last spoke. Oh, aside from the fact I hired like twenty models to hang around the pool all day while you're gone. It's a shame you're missing that."

I can't be certain that he's joking, but I'm pretty sure he is. "I think it's you who is missing out," I reply, moving the phone from one ear to the other. "Guess what I'm about to do."

"I'm not sure I want to know."

"Okay, get serious. You're going to want to know about this," I say, gripping the phone a little tighter.

"Alright, spit it out," Jasha replies, his voice taking on a more somber tone.

"I need to hire Gabriel and his private army," I say, jumping over all the details and getting to the end point.

A long pause follows, and I can almost see Jasha's eyebrows shooting up his forehead. "You're what?"

"Things have gotten messy here," I explain. "The Cartel knows I'm here with Dream, and they want me dead more than they want the drugs. We need to get Dream's cousin back, and it's going to take more than just a few of our men. We need Gabriel's forces."

Jasha lets out a long breath. “That’s a big shift from what you were planning to do before, but I’m not going to argue about ending the Cartel once and for all. Wasn’t I telling you to do this from the beginning?”

“I was waiting for the right time,” I reply, hating that he ended up being the one who was right about the Cartel.

For years, I’ve been holding back on getting involved with them, even as they crept closer and closer to our operations, even going as far as to kidnap and murder one of our men.

It’s time to end this.

“You have my support,” Jasha says, “But you’re not answering the real question. Why are you doing this in the first place? I thought you were just helping that girl retrieve her cousin, not starting a war. Is it worth it now that things have ‘gotten messy,’ as you put it?”

“It’s escalated,” I admit, my mind wandering back to Dream. “The girl, she’s something else, Jasha. I didn’t expect to care about her or her cousin, but I do. And it’s more than just a simple trade now.”

“So, it’s like that, huh?” Jasha asks, his voice tinged with amusement. “You’ve fallen in love in just a couple of days?”

“I’m not in love,” I blurt, my heart slamming into my chest as I realize Dream can probably hear me. I lower my voice to a whisper. “I’m not in love. I just don’t like being bullied by the Cartel. We’re taking them out. All of them.”

“Well, if anyone can pull this off, it’s you,” Jasha says, and I’m relieved by his confidence in me. “I trust you, but be careful, okay? Gabriel’s not someone we want to owe a favor to. You’d better pay him upfront.”

“I’m well aware of that, thank you,” I grumble. “I have a plan.”

“Which is?”

“Protodafinil. All of it,” I reply, bracing myself for his reaction.

“That’s two million dollars! Are you nuts? We could take out the Cartel with a single well-placed missile to their headquarters in Dimalona, and it would

cost a fraction of what you're trying to give Gabriel."

"We're not launching any missiles, Jasha. I'm not starting World War Three over a goddamn kidnapping. Just let me handle this my way."

"I hope your way doesn't involve getting yourself killed over a woman and her idiotic cousin," he replies.

"I'd suggest you watch your tone," I say, the words sliding out from between my teeth like smoke.

"You must be in love," he says with a chuckle. "I don't envy you. Women are straight up evil."

He's speaking from personal experience, and I can't blame him for being bitter, but this is different. I've had my bad experiences with women, but Dream is nothing like anyone I've ever met.

She's special, and I find myself more and more willing to help her just because I want to see her happy. It's not about the Cartel anymore, but I wouldn't dare admit that to Jasha.

"If women are so evil, then why do you have twenty of them hanging out by the pool?" I tease, trying to lighten the conversation. I hate arguing with my brother. I promised my mother we'd stick together, and being the older one, I'm in charge of making sure the promise doesn't get broken.

"Alright, you got me. I don't have that many. Maybe just one or two," he replies.

"Are you serious?"

"No, I'm kidding. I'm not entertaining guests. You told me not to."

"Right," I say, relieved that he's actually listening to me. He tends to go his own way when he thinks he can get away with it. I guess that's how I know he's actually my brother, because I'm the same way.

Jasha clicks his tongue over the phone. "So, you're sure we're going through with this? Do you need my help with anything?"

"I'm sure, and yes, I might ask you to join us," I reply, looking toward the

bathroom to see the shadow of Dream's feet moving around under the door. "Just don't stir up trouble, and don't tell anyone what we're doing. I don't think our men should even know there's nobody home."

"Mission Mexico is top secret. My lips are sealed," he says.

"Take this seriously," I snap.

"I am. Need I remind you that you're the one prancing around Mexico with some random woman and a duffle bag full of schedule one drugs?"

Again, I hate that he's right.

"Just make sure everything is fine at the house before you leave it. You know, don't leave the stove on, make sure the security system is on, and don't –"

"Don't forget to renew your subscription to shut-the-fuck-up. I got you," he interjects.

I roll my eyes. "Get here before Monday if you want a piece of the action. We'll be in Dimalona."

"Got it."

We say our goodbyes, and I end the call, feeling a strange mixture of unease and excitement. The game has changed, and the stakes are higher than ever. But with Jasha's backing, and Dream by my side, I feel like we're going to be able to pull this off.

The Cartel's days are numbered.

I glance at the bathroom door, knowing that what lies beyond it is probably an even greater challenge than the Cartel. The way Dream makes me feel could either make my life complete or ruin me forever.

I sigh, falling backward onto the bed and staring at the ceiling. This one is too even, too smooth and flawless to make shapes out of the imperfections.

I find myself resenting that kind of perfection. There's nothing to be done with it, no problems to solve, no challenges, and no interest to it.

It's boring.

I'm the type of man to need a challenge in his life. When Jasha and I started getting into organized crime, I loved the fact that behind every challenge there was monetary gain. I reveled in knocking down obstacles, obliterating our opposition, and proving to the world that no difficulty was bigger than me.

The money made it fun, but it also wasn't the real reason I did it. I wanted to prove myself, and I feel like I have. The wins aren't as entertaining because I have nobody to share them with but Jasha.

With Dream, I feel like I have a new purpose. I'm excited again, ready to get myself way in over my head and come out swinging so hard that I win against all odds.

I don't want to prove myself to the world anymore.

I want to prove myself to her.

As though to accept my attempts, the bathroom door opens and Dream steps out...

And there's not a shred of clothing on her perfect body.

Dream

I was going to ask Nikolai to bring me something to wear, but I'm not able to get the words out before he charges toward me, grabbing me by the waist and planting his lips against mine.

I'm shocked, unable to register what's happening for the first few seconds, but the taste of his mouth on mine replaces all my inhibitions and I give into him, melting in his arms as he presses his powerful body into mine.

I don't know why he's decided to do this now, or what it'll mean for our future, but I'm so captivated by his primal urges that I put the future to rest for the time being. What matters now is this single moment in time, consequences be damned.

Nikolai's tongue pushes into my mouth, swirling around inside and running across my teeth. A rush moves through me, like I just jumped off a cliff with my eyes closed, unsure if there's solid ground or water beneath me, but willing to take the risk for the hell of it.

It feels suicidal in a way, destined to ruin me, but alluring in a wicked way.

His hands are all over me – feeling, grabbing, squeezing. He cups my ass cheeks and spread them as he dips down, burying his erection between my thighs and grinding it against my pussy.

My wetness building on the fabric of his pants, taking away some of the friction, but it would be better with them off. I move my hands to his belt, unbuckling it and shoving his pants down so hard we both nearly topple backward into the bathroom.

He breaks from the kiss only long enough to take his pants off the rest of the way and fling them across the room. Then, he's back on me, pinning me against the wall and rubbing his throbbing cock between my labia.

He's practically inside me already, spreading his precum over the inner lips of my pussy as he pushes me harder into the wall. There's a fire growing in my belly that's telling me to do it myself if he doesn't, to grab him and guide him in so that he can fuck me standing up.

But he acts before I get the chance to, picking me up and throwing me onto the bed. I nearly roll off, clutching the sheets to keep me from falling to the floor as he jumps onto the mattress like an angry beast.

His eyes meet mine, bright and full of unbridled lust. I've never seen him like this, not even when he climaxed in front of me and made me eat it off the floor.

This is a new level, one that I'm not sure if I'm prepared for.

But one that my body is telling me I need more than anything else.

I let out a happy yelp as he grabs my legs and pulls them open, holding them up in the air as he dives down on top of me. He rubs the head of his cock into my pussy, making it wet with my fluids until it slips in accidentally.

"Oh fuck," I moan, watching as he pushes it in further, testing how much I can take in the first thrust.

"That's a good girl," he purrs, his voice husky and deep in his throat. "I knew I was going to have you from the moment I laid eyes on your pretty face."

I'd like to rebuke that, to say that I'm not that easy, but here I am with my legs up in the air and his cock halfway inside me. I guess I am that easy, but that means he's also that easy.

Or maybe we're just both too crazy about each other to stop ourselves from doing something we'll both regret.

He sinks in further, and my thoughts are washed from my brain like a sandcastle on the edge of the beach.

He takes me deeper with him, pulling me under and drowning me in bliss. Pleasure swims through my organism, visiting every nerve ending in my body and blessing it with the kind of pleasure that feels like it should be reserved for drug use.

Is this even real?

I'd rather believe that it isn't, so the consequences won't be real either.

Nikolai's hips move in a slow but intentional way, feeding the fire within me

while drawing it out as long as possible.

Sweat beads across my upper lip, and I lick it away, tasting the desperation that's building inside of me as I watch my pussy swallow his massive cock. "You're so big," I moan, meaning it with every atom of my being.

"And you're tight as fuck," he groans, thrusting faster. "You're going to make me cum inside you, and I've barely even started."

I grin. "Too easy."

He grabs my hair and pulls my head back onto the bed, holding me there as he leans over me with the devil dancing in his eyes. "I'd like to see you cum first, darling."

"Not a chance," I reply, but I already feel the warmth growing in my belly. If he continues this much longer, I'm going to eat my words.

And that's exactly his intention as he begins to move with less emphasis on depth and more on creating a wave for me to ride that greatly enhances my pleasure. He lets go of my hair, running his fingers down my face until he arrives at my neck.

"This is going to feel so good you won't be able to breathe," he says, making good on that promise by simultaneously thrusting deep inside of me and squeezing my neck to halt the breath in my throat as I gasp.

Pure, chemical bliss floods through my brain, releasing tension in my body like my muscles are dissolving in acid.

Only it's not painful. I can't feel anything but pleasure, even with Nikolai's hand on my throat and his cock so far inside of me that it feels like he should be touching my lungs.

Colors dance in front of my eyes, obscuring Nikolai's focused expression as I ascend into an unspeakable level pleasure. My whole body seems to disappear, and yet I can feel him, thrusting and filling me, stretching and completing me.

I grab Nikolai, digging my fingernails into his back, inflicting my own kind of unspeakable sensations as he cums inside of me. I feel him pumping his

essence into my body, releasing everything he has as he lets out a deep groan.

I hold him in, wrapping my legs around him and pressing him deeper. I want everything. Not a single drop will go to waste.

I keep my legs around him, even when he collapses onto me, panting and uttering delicious promises in my ear that I know he can't keep. As long as he's inside me, I'm infatuated with him. The second he pulls out and starts acting like an asshole again, I'll forget why I ever fucked him.

But for now, I have him right where I need him.

Dream

I wake up in the morning with my skin stuck to Nikolai's, barely able to peel myself off him before stumbling to the bathroom to relieve myself.

I guess that should've been done right after we had sex, but I was completely drained, unable to do much more than curl up in his protective arms and go to sleep. I didn't even get a chance to replace all the water I lost due to sweating, so my urine is dark when it comes out.

I cup my hands under the tap after washing them in the sink, drinking until I feel like a water balloon. With water sloshing in my belly, I waddle back to bed. I fall onto the mattress and Nikolai pulls me back into his incredible warmth with a sleepy grunt.

We fall back asleep for a few more hours, as though the dangers outside these four little walls simply don't exist. I know Nikolai would jump into action the second any sign of danger emerged, but there's been nothing since we arrived.

All is safe in this city, at least for the time being.

We lie in bed, our bodies fitting together like puzzle pieces, as the sun rises and makes a successful attempt to wake us by peeking through the curtain and falling across our faces. Nikolai is the first to stir, and then I wake up, peeling myself off him once again.

I'm reluctant to leave bed completely, but I don't have to. He jumps up, immediately starting the coffee machine and assuring me that he will get something for me to eat.

"Just relax, my darling," he says as he walks toward the curtains and opens them, standing in front of the window completely naked.

His body is magnificent, but I don't want to share it with anyone else. "Get away from the window before someone sees you," I say, my words tinged with jealousy.

"Just wanted to see if we were facing the street or not," he replies, closing the

curtains and stepping back. “It’s safer not to be.”

“Are we?” I ask, sitting up and pulling the covers over my naked body. I don’t feel quite as comfortable exposing myself as he does. I do envy his confidence, though.

“We’re facing the courtyard in the center of the building, so we’re safe unless the Cartel happens to rent a room on the other side. Then, we’re probably going to need more guns than the one I brought.”

I pout. “I hope not, because you wasted all your ammo shooting up that bar before we left.”

He laughs, leaning over to check on the coffee as it starts to fill the pot. “I brought a few boxes of rounds for that gun, actually, but we are going to need more than that, and you should probably learn how to shoot before we challenge the Cartel.”

“You think it’ll come down to that?”

He shrugs. “I hope not, but your safety is my first priority.”

My heart melts when he says that, and I try not to show that I’m swooning over his words and I hide my face behind the blanket. My smile gives it away, though, and he grins along with me, walking over to the bed and sitting down next to me.

“You’re too cute,” he says, pinching me beneath the covers.

I laugh, jumping up and trying to get away from his hand. “Stop it,” I giggle.

“No, I think I like this game,” he teases, his green eyes sparkling with joy. He reaches out to me again, and I playfully slap his hand away.

“You’re too much,” I declare, my face growing hot as he reaches for me once more.

“And you love it,” he replies, his grin vanishing as his eyes lock onto mine. The room grows still, and the energy changes. The playful atmosphere becomes charged with something more intense, more important.

It scares me. I’m not ready to feel this way for a man I don’t know all that

much about.

Maybe it's the mystery that's making me feel this way.

Maybe it's not... love.

No, it'd be too soon. It wouldn't be possible.

"I think I kind of like you," I whisper, feeling a connection that goes beyond physical attraction. It's like we're drawn together by forces neither of us can control.

He reaches out, his fingers gently brushing a strand of hair from my face. The touch sends a shiver down my spine, and my breath catches in my throat.

"Maybe I like you too," he says softly, his Russian accent making the words sound like poetry.

I can't help but lean into his touch, craving more. He seems to understand, because he draws me closer, his arms wrapping around me as his lips find mine.

The kiss is gentle at first, exploring the places in my mouth he discovered last night. But soon it deepens, becoming more urgent. He nearly falls on top of me before we break apart.

"We should eat something," he whispers, but neither of us moves.

"Later," I breathe, unable to tear myself away from him.

"Later," he agrees, and his lips find mine once more.

He tastes like promises that can't be kept, bullets through my heart and heroin pumped deep into my soul. I'm addicted to him already.

The sex is gentler this time, more patient yet more intense because I know what it means for us. Last night wasn't just some desperate fling. It feels like our bodies are made for each other, as unlikely as that may be, considering our backgrounds, but it's true, anyway. We just connect.

And it's hard to hate a man who makes me feel so damn good. His lips light me on fire, and when he cums inside of me, I'm willing to take the risk that I might end up having his baby.

I just hope he'd stick around if it came to that.

I need to know more about him before I keep doing this. I need to know that under the harsh Bratva exterior, there's a good man.

Or, at the very least, a loyal man.

"What do you think about Mexico?" Nikolai asks, propping himself up on his elbow beside me.

I'm still breathless from cumming so hard, so it takes me a moment to respond. "Um, it's hot. I don't know. I thought I'd be coming here on different terms."

His expression deepens with seriousness. "I'm sorry about your cousin. We are going to get him back. I talked to Jasha and he's on board with it. All that's really left is to reach out to Gabriel and talk him into trading his army for the P50."

"You really didn't have to do all of this," I say. "I know it's not just about getting rid of the Cartel for your own business."

"Isn't it?"

"I knew you were going to deny it, and that's fine," I say, smiling wistfully. "But you still admitted that you liked me, and I suppose that's enough."

He clicks his tongue, shaking his head at me. "What is it that you want to hear from me?"

"There are many things, but they only mean anything if they're true. I don't like empty words. Some women may fall for that crap, but I'm not one of them."

"Oh, I don't know about that," he replies, tilting his head to the side and flashing his white teeth.

"I didn't fall for your words."

"No?"

"No, I fell for your body," I reply with a laugh that borders on a cackle.

“You’re cute when you laugh,” he says.

“Shut up.”

“No,” he says, moving closer. “I’m serious. You’re... perfect. I don’t know how else to describe it, so I’ll leave it at that.”

I allow myself to sink deeper into the warm fuzzy feeling he gives me, ignore the alarms in my head that are telling me not to let him do this to me. After all this is over, we’re never going to see each other again. It’s just a fling in Mexico, and I’m about to fall in love and get my heart broken in under a week.

It’s fitting for me. I tend to get caught up in things that I like, ignoring the consequences even when they’re glaringly obvious. Nikolai is like that, multiplied by a million, so he’s definitely going to break my heart.

But that’s only if he doesn’t get me killed first.

“I’m curious about you,” Nikolai says, shifting his weight a bit to be even closer to me. “I know about your relationship with Eddy and how important it is to you, but I want to know more about you. It’s like you just appeared out of nowhere.”

“That’s what *you* did,” I reply, poking him in the chest. “What’s a Russian mafia boss doing in Texas, anyway?”

“You first,” he says with a sly grin. “Tell me how you got to be the way that you are. I already know you got your heart broken by some jock in school, but what about after that? You’ve just been all by yourself ever since?”

“Kind of, yeah,” I admit even though I’m scared he’ll think less of me. “I’ve learned to trust myself and very few others. It’s lonely, but it’s better than being let down. That’s really why I’m so close to Eddy. He’s the only person who’s been there for me through everything.”

“Family must stick together,” Nikolai replies, his voice soft and understanding. “My brother and I would die for each other.”

“So, you understand that I would risk it all for Eddy, even if what he did was stupid.”

“Sure. Jasha is always doing stupid things. It wouldn’t make a difference to me whether it was his fault or not, I would always protect him.”

“You’re sweeter than you look,” I say, feeling warm inside again.

“The core is bitter, but you haven’t bitten that far,” he replies, looking away for a moment. His eyes lose focus, and he sighs before looking back at me. “But more about you. Have you really never tried connecting with anyone? Not even a date?”

A strand of hair falls over my face, and I mess with it to avoid focusing too much on him. It feels a bit like staring into the sun. “I’ve been on dates, but nothing very impressive.”

“I could impress you,” he says as though he hasn’t already done that.

I raise an eyebrow. “What do you mean?”

“I’ll take you out for a date, and you’ll never forget it,” he replies, and I know in my heart that I can’t say no to him.

“I might be up for that. It just depends on what it is,” I say, tucking my hair behind my ear. “You know, I’m not much of a drinker.”

“After my experience at the bar yesterday, I can’t say I’m too keen on drinking either, but I do like to dance.” He wiggles his hips a little, and I want him to fuck me all over again.

I laugh. “Can you really? I’m total garbage at it.”

He jumps up from the bed so fast that I nearly have a heart attack. Then, shuffling backward like he’s sliding around in socks, he starts to dance for me. I think it’s a Salsa, but then again, I don’t know much about dancing.

But what I do know is that Nikolai wasn’t kidding when he mentioned dancing. He’s moving like there’s music in the air and few glasses of wine pumping through his thick veins.

I’m impressed. How on earth does a Bratva boss know how to dance like that?

“Come, I’ll show you,” he says, moving so quickly back and forth that his

penis slaps against his thighs.

I laugh, pulling the blankets off and moving to the edge of the bed. “You’re going to hurt yourself.”

“Relax, I’m a pro,” he says, grabbing my hand and yanking me off the bed.

I yelp as I stumble toward him, but he catches me in his arms, guiding my body to the sound of the nonexistent music as he attempts to show me how to move like he does. Never in a million years did I think I’d be able to dance like this, but with his large hands on my hips and his eyes locked to mine, my body finds the rhythm, and suddenly, I’m dancing Salsa.

He moves me twice around the room, and then spins me around until everything is a blur, catching me just as I lose balance again and holding me close. We’re both laughing, the air in the room buzzing with excitement.

“Tonight, we’re going out dancing,” he declares.

I nod, still laughing as I regain my balance. “You mentioned breakfast earlier. Maybe it’s time for lunch, though.”

“That’s right,” he says, dashing over to the dresser and pulling out a shirt. “I was having so much fun with you that I totally forgot about eating. You must be starving.”

My stomach growls, but the only thing I’m really hungry for is more of Nikolai. I want him now, later, and all the time. He puts a flame in my soul that I can’t say I’ve had since I was a girl, running around in the garden and trying to catch lightning bugs.

I’m starting to remember that life can be fun.

A dress lands in my arms, and I look over to see that Nikolai just tossed it to me. “Get dressed. There’s a great place I know a few blocks from here. I promise you’ll like it. Plus, they have something I want to give Jasha before he gets here.”

“Wait, Jasha is coming?”

“Yes, I thought I mentioned that to you. Sorry if it slipped my mind. There’s just so much going on right now,” he replies, stepping into a pair of black

trousers.

“When will he be here?” I ask. I’m honestly not sure if I’ll be prepared to deal with both brothers at the same time. Jasha was... a bit aggressive compared to Nikolai.

“He’s meeting us in Dimalona. Probably Sunday, though he might come sooner, depending on how eager he is to get in on the action. He likes to shoot things.”

I shake my head with a wry smile. “Sounds familiar.”

He doesn’t seem to hear me. He’s far too excited getting ready, like this trip is one big vacation for him.

Or maybe he just feels the same way I feel about him, but I don’t want to get my hopes up.

That’s how you get let down.

Nikolai

I haven't had this much energy since I was eighteen and running from the police for the thrill of it.

The idea of taking Dream out dancing makes me feel alive again. I used to dance all the time, but I haven't had much time for it because of how busy work has been, so it feels good to have a woman to go out with, especially as one as beautiful and interesting as Dream.

It doesn't matter that she doesn't have experience dancing. It's not actually that hard, and she's proven to be a quick learner, so I'm sure she'll catch on before the night is over.

As I power through lunch with her, I catch her staring at me several times with those big brown eyes of hers. It seems almost too good to be true, so I try not to get too distracted by her. I can't forget that she gave me such a hard time when we first arrived here. If she's capable of disrespecting me once, I'm sure she could do it again.

Of course, I want to believe things have changed, but I've made up my mind not to let my guard down. We're still on a mission, and even if it seems like everything is coming together better than I had imagined, it only takes one wrong move to send everything toppling over into chaos.

I won't let my guard down tonight, and that's especially important because I haven't told anyone that I'll be out with Dream, not even Jasha. It's a bit of a risk, and I'm sure he'd have a problem with it, but what he doesn't know won't hurt him.

This might be my only night to show Dream that I'm not the asshole she thinks I am. It's also my opportunity to discover more about her, to really dig deep and figure out who she is.

We finish our lunch without any notable event, no Cartel members lurking in the bustling venue to turn the day into another shootout, and no text messages from Diego threatening to kill Eddy if we don't comply with some new requests.

Even Dream seems to be quieter, but I know that's just the calm before the storm. Once I get in touch with Gabriel and put the plan into action, she's going to start getting nervous. It's impossible to ignore something once it's right up in your face, and Monday is looming on the horizon like an oversized sun about to explode and take everyone with it.

We stop by a few stores on the way back to the hotel, but Dream won't show me what she's bought. She keeps saying that it's a surprise, but I'm not a fan of those. In my experience, they're never anything good.

Back at the hotel, I take the opportunity to call Gabriel while Dream gets ready for our night out. I don't need that long to get ready, but she insists that if she's going to make a fool of herself on the dance floor, that she should at least look good while doing it.

I'm not really sure what that means, since she does look good, and she won't make a fool of herself, but I'm not in the business of arguing with Dream anymore. I've discovered it's not worth it because she rarely gives in.

So, I allow her to take the bathroom for a while, taking the opportunity to call Gabriel and find out if he's interested in my proposition.

"Money talks, and bullshit walks," Gabriel grumbles as he answers the phone.

"Then you'd better start walking," I reply with a grin.

Silence fills the space between us, and then Gabriel bursts into a fit of laughter. "You've always been a bastard, Nikolai. Or is it Jasha this time? I can never tell you two apart by voice alone."

"Nikolai," I reply, wandering over to the window and moving the curtain just far enough to get a look out into the courtyard. Nobody is there, nor has anyone ever been since we came here, but I refuse to get comfortable again after the attack at the bar.

"I knew you'd come crawling back to me eventually," Gabriel says.

"Not crawling. Walking. Maybe driving."

He laughs. "Alright, I can tell you're not in any real trouble, so what's up?"

“I have a deal for you,” I say, moving away from the window. “Something you’re going to want.”

“The only thing I want is an early retirement. This shit gets to me sometimes,” he grumbles.

“Believe me, I know, but what I’m about to suggest might help you along with that.”

“As long as it doesn’t get me killed.”

“It might be a little dangerous,” I admit.

“Now you’ve gotten my attention. What is it that you’re trying to do?”

“I have about...” I lower my voice to a whisper. “Ten kilograms of Protodafinil sitting in a duffle bag in my hotel in Mexico.”

“Don’t joke around like that,” Gabriel warns.

“I’m not joking,” I say, looking over to the duffle bag in question. “You’re going to have to trust me on this. I picked it up near the border, and I want you to have it.”

“Obviously there’s a catch.”

“I need your private army on Monday. We’re taking down the Dimalona Cartel.”

“Now I know you’re joking... Nikolai, please tell me you’re joking.”

“I’m not joking,” I reply flatly.

“I told you not to tell me that,” he groans.

“Listen, I’m offering you two million dollars’ worth of P50 in exchange for your soldiers. I don’t even need you, really, but if you want to join, you –”

“I don’t go anywhere without my men,” he snaps, cutting me off. “And that’s not really two million. Here, it goes for closer to one and a half.”

“I’ll get the rest of the money to you once we dissolve the leader of the Dimalona Cartel in acid,” I reply, gripping the phone so tight that my fingers

ache. “I just need a yes or a no, so I know I’m not wasting my time here.”

“No... Yes... Yes and no. I need to know more about what you’re trying to do.”

“I already told you,” I reply, frustration growing in my voice. “I’m going to destroy the Dimalona Cartel. They’ve been giving me trouble for too long. Recently, they kidnapped one of my guys near the border and sent me a video of them throwing him into a pit of snakes. Now, they’ve snatched up some American woman’s cousin and they’re holding him for ransom.”

“I didn’t know they were capable of all that. Things must’ve gotten worse,” he says, his voice cut with deep concern.

“My point exactly. We need to take them out now before it gets to the point where we can’t handle it. I want your help.”

There’s a long silence, and for a moment, I think he’s decided to quit talking to me. But eventually, he comes back, breathing into the phone with the longest, most dramatic sigh I’ve heard from a man before. “I can lend you my people, but I want to know everything. That means names, dates, details... everything. If I get the feeling that you’re holding something back from me, I’m out of this bitch faster than you can blink.”

I’m glad he can’t see how wide my smile is right now. He wouldn’t trust me at all. “I’ll give you everything. Jasha is coming down before Monday, and we’re all going to get together and hash this out.”

“Not much time,” he mutters.

“That’s why I’m giving you the P50. You think I’d be paying you so much if this wasn’t such short notice.”

“Shrewd motherfucker,” he says with a laugh.

“You know it.”

“Well, get the details to me as soon as you can. You said you were already in Mexico?”

“Close to Dimalona,” I affirm.

He sucks air sharply in through his teeth. “I’d be careful if I were you. They’re opportunists, and if they caught you lurking around, I’m certain they’d try to take you out.”

“Funny enough, they already tried. Pissed me off a bit, and now you understand why I’m after them so hard now. They’re getting ballsy, spreading out too far, and I think it’s about time they were put in their place.”

“Six feet under.”

A smile lifts the corners of my mouth. “Exactly.”

“Okay, I’d like to hear from you tomorrow, if that’s fine. Just a follow-up, and we’ll decide where to meet and all that. I’m looking forward to seeing you again after all these years. And Jasha. I think he owes me money from a poker game we played way back when.”

“I’ll settle his debt if you buy him one of those bottles with the worm in it. You know the stuff, right?”

“Go to any tourist shop and they’ll have it,” he replies.

“I want the real deal, not some fake shit. I’m sure you have a bottle at that compound of yours somewhere.”

“I’ll take a look.”

“Thanks, I’ll see you soon.”

“Bye.”

I hang up the phone the moment the door to the bathroom opens and Dream steps out. She’s fumbling with the back of her dress, probably a zipper she can’t get up all the way, but I’m too stunned by her angelic appearance to think to offer assistance with it.

Her cheeks turn red as she realizes she’s under such intense observation, and she turns away from me a bit, pointing to the zipper on her back. “Could you help me with this?”

She’s a goddess, the absolute definition of perfection. Her hair is up in an intricate bun, with loose brown curls falling down from it to frame her soft

face. She doesn't need makeup but she wears it perfectly, with a little sparkle around her eyes that makes her skin glow in the light.

Her dress is a striking red color, like blood spilled across luxurious fabric, and she smells like a garden would if it grew cotton candy instead of flowers. I don't know what it is, but it makes me want to breathe her into my lungs and never exhale.

My heart pounds in my chest, and for a moment, I'm completely lost in her. She smiles, and it's like a punch to the gut, full of warmth with a hint of knowing mischief that sends a shiver down my spine.

I force myself out of the daze I've found myself in, shaking my head a bit as I walk toward her. "You look amazing," I say, my fingers trembling as I grab the zipper and pull it up.

Her voice comes out in barely more than a whisper. "Thank you."

I step back, looking down at the plain t-shirt and slacks that I'm wearing and feeling sorely underdressed. "And look at me," I say with a chuckle. "I need to get dressed. They'd steal you from me in a heartbeat if I went out with you like this."

"No," she says with a coy smile. "I'm the one who needs to keep an eye on *you*. I'm sure all those women out there will be dying to get their hands on you."

"But the only one I want is you," I reply, the words flowing out with truthful clarity.

She looks at me, her beautiful brown eyes threatening to swallow me whole. "Do you think it's too soon to be saying stuff like that?"

"I'd regret it if I never got the chance to."

Dream

He's saying all the right things, making me feel like I'm his queen and that he'd do anything for me, but there's still something keeping me from trusting him completely.

"You're not scared?" I ask him, looking deep into his glistening green eyes for the truth.

"Are you?" he asks.

"A little bit, yeah," I answer, shifting my weight onto the other foot. I feel pretty when he looks at me, but I'm still not confident in what we're doing. What if it's all for nothing? What if my heart is shattered to pieces and I feel stupid for falling for a man in a matter of days?

And worse, would he laugh at me if he knew how crazy I was for him already?

"Why are you afraid?" he asks, his intense gaze softening.

"You just make me feel like I can trust you, and I know I can't," I reply, and even that's too much for me to say.

"I will prove to you that you can," he says, puffing out his chest at the challenge. "I'm not the man you take me for."

"Relax, I didn't mean anything bad," I say, holding my hands up. "It's just that I have problems opening up, and it's not that easy for me to trust *anyone*, not just you. Every time I've opened up, I've been hurt or let down. It's easier to keep people at a distance."

Tears come to my eyes as he nods in understanding. I don't want to cry in front of him like this, but I can't stop myself. I'm going to ruin my makeup.

He pulls me toward the warmth of his chest, wiping away a tear that escapes down my cheek. "But you can't live life in fear, Dream. Not everyone will hurt you. You have to take a chance sometimes."

"You say that now," I reply, taking a deep breath to stop more tears from

coming. “But what about when all this is over? What happens to us? Will you just walk away, leaving me alone again?”

His eyes widen, and he shakes his head earnestly. “I will never abandon you. I promise.”

“You can’t promise that,” I say, pulling away. “You don’t know what the future holds.”

“I know what I feel, and what I want,” he insists. “And I want you, Dream. Not just for now, not just for this adventure, but for much longer. I want to know everything about you. I want to be the one you can trust, the one you open up to.”

His words ring through my soul like a church bell, and I feel a warmth spread throughout my body. Could he be the one to break through the walls I’ve built around myself? I hated him at first, but now it seems impossible not to love him.

“I want to believe you,” I whisper.

“You can,” he says firmly. “You must. We have to trust each other if we’re going to work together to get your cousin back. This is a big deal.”

I nod, knowing that he’s right. I have to put my fears aside and go through with this.

Tonight, all that means is trusting that he’ll teach me to dance and not let me embarrass myself in public.

On Monday, that means trusting him with my life.

“I’m going to get dressed,” he says after a moment of silence. “Let me know if you’ll be okay to go out.”

I cross my arms. “Oh, you’re not going to get away from teaching me that easily.”

“I’m not trying to get away from anything,” he insists with a bewildered expression before he realizes that I’m messing with him. He smiles, tilting his head to the side. “You’re trouble. You’re big trouble.”

“Are you going to spank me for it?” I ask, bending over and wiggling my ass in his direction.

He nearly falls over as he attempts to change his shirt. “You’d better not tempt me.”

I know we’ll never get out of the hotel if we start flirting too hard and end up having sex, so I stop and allow him to get ready without distracting him further.

Once he’s dressed, it’s my turn to be amazed.

His tailored black suit hugs his broad shoulders, perfectly accentuating the strength and confidence that have brought him this far. If I was ever to trust a man, he’d be the one.

And maybe he is.

Tonight, I might just find out.

As he turns to me with a deliberate smirk, I’m struck by how completely he’s captured my attention. In his presence, the rest of the world seems to fade away, leaving only the two of us, locked in a moment that feels both fleeting and infinite.

“Shall we?” he asks, offering me his arm.

I take it, feeling a rush as we leave the hotel and step out into the darkening evening together.

I’ve stepped into uncharted territory, a place where the rules are different, and the dangers are new and unknown. I’m captivated by Nikolai, and it scares me, but it excites me. Whatever happens, I know I’m going to remember this. I’ll never forget the way Nikolai makes me feel.

The streets are ripe with excitement for the night to come, people already rushing out to grab food and drinks before it becomes too busy. The usual scent of gasoline and dust in the air is replaced by rich cologne and sweet perfume, and there are thousands of tiny lights strung through the city.

It feels like everyone has gotten together just to go out and party tonight, something that never happens where I’m from. The sense of community,

even in a big city like this, is enviable. If it wasn't for the Cartel, I'd be tempted to stay here much longer.

We arrive at the club after a short walk. From the outside, it looks unassuming, but the moment we step through the door, the atmosphere changes completely.

Red lights bathe the club with an all-encompassing glow, casting a sensual aura that makes everything feel just a bit more enticing. My dress looks nude against my body, having both taken on the same red color from the light. The quick, rhythmic beat of Salsa music vibrates through the floor, pulsing in time with my heartbeat.

Without hesitation, Nikolai leads me to the dance floor, his hand firm around my waist. I can feel the eyes of others on us as we make our way, but it's as if I'm under a spell, and nothing else matters but the connection between us.

I'm not even nervous. I guess that's what trust feels like.

The song that was playing ends as we find our spot, and I watch as Nikolai's eyes light up with anticipation of the next one. Without delay, a new melody fills the room, and my body responds to the rhythm as Nikolai begins to guide me.

I follow his lead, allowing him to move me through the steps. The intimacy of the dance is electrifying, our bodies moving in unison, each movement deliberate and filled with purpose.

His hand on my back, his gaze locked with mine, I lose myself in the dance. The world fades away, and it's just us, two souls entwined in the rhythm of the music. The more we dance, the more I feel a connection that goes beyond mere physical attraction. I'm drawn to him in a way I've never felt before.

He leans into my ear, speaking just loud enough for me to hear him over the music. "You're doing great, babe. You're a natural."

"You're just a good teacher," I reply, shaking my head. "I can't dance."

"But you already are," he says, grinning as he lets me go and I realize I'm still moving in time with the music. Either he's worked some magic on me, or I really do know how to dance. It doesn't really matter to me which one it

is, only that I feel incredible letting loose on the dance floor.

Nikolai grabs me again and spins me around like a top, proving that despite my skill, he still knows far more than I do. He catches me just before I fall, holding me steady and allowing me to sink back into the Salsa rhythm.

I can't stop smiling, but Nikolai doesn't make me feel the least bit self-conscious about it. I could be grinning like a fool, and he'd still call me beautiful.

What's more is that I'd believe him.

The experience is terrifying and exhilarating all at once. I can't help but wonder if he feels it too. Each touch, each glance seems to linger a little longer, filled with a new depth of emotion.

Our bodies are close, but it's more than just physical. It's as if our souls are reaching out to each other, finding something they've been seeking all along. I've never felt anything like this before, and I know that I'm changed.

The dance ends, and we stand there for a moment, still locked in each other's gaze. The next song plays but it sounds distant and unreal, a mere backdrop to the connection that has just been brought to life between us.

I can see in his eyes now that he feels it too. There's a vulnerability in them that wasn't there before, like his thick brick walls have crumbled, and I'm finally allowed to see the boy hiding inside the savage.

I see the parts of him that he's kept hidden since being hardened by the Bratva lifestyle, the laughter he shared with his brother as a boy, and the love his mother selflessly gave him. I see everything now, and it changes who Nikolai is to me.

He takes my hand, leading me off the dance floor and to the bar. I feel like I'm floating, finally free from fear and doubt. I'm weightless.

We both order water. The only buzz we need has already been achieved from the incredible experience of falling in love with Nikolai. I wouldn't admit it to him just yet, but neither of us needs to say anything to know. It's happening without words.

As I finish my drink, I look across the dance floor in search of a bathroom.

Nikolai reads my mind. “By the entrance, on the right.”

“Thanks. I’ll just be a moment,” I say, hopping off the bar stool. His eyes are on me as I walk away, and I feel confident as I take long strides and swing my hips. It feels like nothing can break my power until I check my phone and discover three missed calls and a dozen texts from Diego.

I gasp, changing my direction from the bathroom and barreling out the door to find out what’s going on.

Suddenly, I feel guilty for having gone out at all.

Dream

My hands shake so hard it's difficult to hold my phone still enough to watch the video that Diego sent me thirty minutes ago. I know it's Eddy, but he doesn't look like himself at all. His face is all torn up, like they've been lashing him with a whip across it, and his eyes are so bloodshot that I'd be surprised if his vision wasn't permanently damaged.

Why is Diego sending me this? It's like he knows I'm out here having fun, and he wants me to feel bad that Eddy is suffering in the meantime.

I lean against the brick wall, trying not to puke when the acrid smell of cigarette smoke invades my nostrils. I wave my hand in front of my face, guilt eating up my insides as I scroll through the other messages Diego sent me.

He doesn't seem angry, just persistent, and he insists that we meet up tomorrow morning instead of Monday.

Fuck, that doesn't give us enough time to plan anything, but perhaps that was his intention. He wants to force me to play the Cartel's game, and since they know I'm here with Nikolai, whatever trust they had that I wouldn't sidestep the rules has vanished.

I'm cornered, and they're using Eddy's suffering to drive their point in.

But instead of making me afraid, it makes me angry. Eddy doesn't deserve to be abused like this. They don't have to keep beating him up and sending videos to me about it. Simply kidnapping him and holding him for ransom was enough to send me running across the border with their precious drugs. Everything else has just caused undue misery, and it's time they paid the price for it.

I shoot off a quick text to Diego, warning him not to hurt Eddy any further. If they kill him, the deal is off. They're being evil and cruel for no reason.

Even Nikolai, the heavy-handed and formidable Bratva boss, has a code of honor. He's respectable, even if he is a criminal, and that makes the Cartel look even worse in my eyes.

They don't deserve to exist in the same world that men like Nikolai exist.

I want them dead.

Every last one of them.

I've never wished such harm on anyone before, but the shy girl inside of me has withered away, and she's been replaced by a burning ball of pure rage. I almost want to call Diego just to scream at him, but I need to keep Eddy's safety in mind.

We're getting him back tomorrow.

Upon this realization, relief rushes through me, and I drop my phone on the ground. Tears well in my eyes, and I slump down against the brick wall, burying my face in my hands in a feeble attempt to hide my emotions.

I hear someone say something to me in Spanish, probably thinking I've been stood up for a date or some other meaningless trepidation that pales in relation to what I've really been through.

The truth is beyond what anyone else could understand, aside from Nikolai. He's the only one who knows me now. He's the only one who can make me feel anything but sorrow.

I pick my phone up off the ground and walk back into the club, smearing my makeup as I wipe the tears from my eyes. I can tell people are looking at me, but that doesn't bother me as much as Nikolai's expression when he sees me. His laid-back smile melts into a look of deep worry, and I want to run away as he rushes toward me.

"What's wrong? What's going on?" he asks, holding me at arm's length and looking at my face as I try to hide it.

"We need to leave," I say, shaking my head. "We can't talk here."

His whole body stiffens, and his voice drops an octave. "Let's go."

He takes charge of the situation, taking my arm and escorting me out of the club and onto the street. I think he's going to ask me what's wrong immediately, but he takes me back to the hotel before saying a single word.

Once we're there, he shuts the door and turns to me, studying me like he's trying to figure out if I'm hurt.

I'm not hurt physically, but emotionally I've been bludgeoned.

"What happened?" he asks, his eyes wide and bordering on frantic.

"I just got a message from Diego. Well, rather several messages. They've beaten up Eddy pretty badly, and they're saying that they're going to kill him if we don't meet up tomorrow morning to make the deal."

"We can't go tomorrow. Gabriel isn't ready," he says, running his fingers through his sweaty hair.

"I'm sure that's what they want, to catch us off guard."

"We can't do that. Tell them we're not close enough, that we agreed to meet Monday and that's what we're doing."

"No," I blurt, taking a step back. "We can't do that to Eddy. They said they would kill him."

A bitter laugh escapes his mouth. "They're not going to kill him. They'd lose the drugs and the deal would be off. Tell them we're sticking to Monday. It'll give us time to blast their asses out of this country once and for all."

"I'm not taking that risk," I reply firmly. "We're going tomorrow."

"We're not," he says, his voice rising dramatically in volume.

"He's not *your cousin!* You don't get to make that kind of choice!"

"It doesn't matter," he says, jabbing his thumb into his chest. "I'm the one in charge here."

I ball up my fists, tempted to throw one at him and deal with the consequences later. "You're not in charge of me."

His eyes narrow, and his face turns a shade darker, filled with fury. "No? Well, I am in charge of this operation. And I won't let you ruin it by giving in to their demands. Eddy knew the risks when he got involved with the Cartel. We have to play this smart or we'll lose our chance to destroy them."

“Smart?” I yell, tears of frustration streaming down my face. “You think letting them torture Eddy is playing it smart? That’s cold-hearted, even for you!”

Nikolai’s jaw clenches, and he takes a step closer to me, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. “Don’t you ever question how cold my heart can be. I’m doing you a favor by saving Eddy, but we must do it on terms that will allow us to take down the Cartel at the same time. Don’t let them manipulate you into making a bad trade. Your emotions are getting the better of you.”

“My emotions?” I yell, the rage inside me boiling over. “You think this is about emotions? This is about doing what’s right! This is about saving a man’s life! How can you just stand there and be so cruel?”

“You think this is cruelty? You think I want to see your cousin suffer? You just don’t understand what we’re up against. The Cartel doesn’t play by any rules. You can’t just agree to go along with them and hope they’ll treat you fairly. Once they have the drugs, they’ll kill Eddy, and it’ll be your fault.”

“My fault?!” I counter, my voice breaking as my tolerance does too. “I’m the one who’s been seeing what they’ve done to Eddy! I’m the one who’s been receiving those videos, those threats! I’m the one who cares. If they kill him because you want to trick them into an ambush, it’s going to be your fault, not mine.”

“You understand nothing!” Nikolai roars, his eyes wild with frustration. “You’re letting your emotions rule you, and it’s blinding you to what needs to be done. We need to crush them, and that doesn’t happen if we let them use Eddy to distract us.”

I laugh at his unwillingness to see my side of this. How could he be so selfish, so set in his ways that he would risk Eddy’s life just to further his mafia interests? That’s what this is about, after all. He wants to take down the Cartel so he can be the only one pushing drugs over the border, and if he has to kill Eddy to do it, then he will.

“You motherfucker,” I snarl as I realize his motivations. “You’re just using me to get to the Cartel. You don’t care about saving anyone. I bet you’d even let me die if it meant getting to destroy them.”

“Don’t you fucking dare accuse me of something like that,” he says, pounding his chest with a heavy fist. “I’m a Bratva boss, not a savage.”

“That’s the problem,” I reply, throwing my hands up in annoyance. “You think everything revolves around your stupid criminal organization filled with stupid fucking criminals.”

“Don’t forget that your cousin is a criminal, too,” he blurts.

My stomach drops. “Oh, now that’s cold, even for you.”

He flinches at my words, and for a moment, a flicker of doubt crosses his face. But it’s gone in an instant, replaced by rigid determination. “I know exactly what I’m doing, and I know exactly what’s at stake. You will follow my lead, or you can leave. The choice is yours.”

I stare at him in disbelief, the words hanging in the air between us like a death sentence. The man I thought I knew, the man I thought cared about me, has just laid down an ultimatum, drawing a line between us that might never be crossed again.

I turn away from him, my heart breaking into pieces. “I thought you were different. I thought we were in this together.”

He doesn’t respond. Not a word of comfort, not an apology for taking things too far.

Nothing.

I storm out of the room, slamming the door behind me, leaving behind not just the man who was supposed to help me, but also a part of myself that I may never get back. The trust, the connection, the belief in something better – it’s all gone, shattered by the harsh reality of the man Nikolai really is.

He’s a Bratva boss, and I was a fool to think he’d ever be anything more.

Nikolai

My first instinct is to run after Dream, but I know she won't get far without any of her belongings. She'll be back, if only to try to take the P50 to trade for her cousin's life.

But it doesn't work like that, and she should know better. You can't give in to pressure from the Cartel. They'll just keep taking and taking until you're left with nothing.

And then they'll kill you.

I know Dream sees why we can't keep giving in to whatever new request Diego comes up with while he's half-baked in a bunker after torturing her cousin for entertainment. Eddy's fate is out of our hands until we're able to strike, and then we will get revenge for what they've done to him.

Heartless, indeed.

I'm not more heartless than she is for twisting my words and making me sound like a monster.

Of course, I care about getting her cousin back. I wouldn't be here if I didn't want to help her and her family, but we're not going to help anyone but the Cartel if we keep giving in to their demands.

Gabriel doesn't have time to get ready for the ambush if it's tomorrow morning. Even Monday isn't far enough away for him to be completely prepared, but short notice is better than no notice.

I smack my forehead, groaning as I begin to pace the room. I feel stupid for arguing with Dream. It gets us nowhere, and she probably hates me again because I couldn't control my goddamn temper.

I should call Jasha. I know he'll tell me I'm an idiot, but maybe he can help me figure out what to do.

Or how to get through to Dream.

I fish around in my jacket pocket for a cigar before realizing I forgot to bring

any to Mexico. That's probably another reason why I'm on edge, but I'm not going to leave the room to get any until Dream is back. I don't want her to think I left her. That's something I would never do, no matter how horrible she believes me to be.

I take a deep breath to stop my hands from shaking as I dial Jasha. If he laughs at me for this, I'm not going to give him the bottle of mezcal with the worm in it that he wanted. In fact, I'd probably go one further and knock his lights out when I returned home.

Thankfully, he doesn't sound like he's in the mood for jokes when I call him. "Everything alright?" he asks, as though he senses my emotional turmoil from over the border.

"No," I admit bluntly. "I'm not in any danger at the moment, but things have gone south with the girl."

"She cheated or something?" he asks, jumping to quite possibly the dumbest conclusion.

"Look, I know you have a history hanging over your head, but I don't think she's the type to do that. It's worse because if she cheated, I could hate her and move on. As it stands, she's probably the one who hates me."

"You need to chill with the drinking. You know you get all pissy when you're drunk sometimes."

I groan. "I haven't had a drop of fucking alcohol, Jasha, and I'm not an angry drunk. That was one time, and it was because you kept pushing me."

I can practically hear him rolling his eyes over the phone, but he knows well enough not to say anything to bother me further. He just pauses for a moment before continuing. "Okay, so if it wasn't the booze, what was it? Things got too real for her?"

"Her head is up in the clouds, so that's probably not even possible," I reply, shaking my head. "She thinks she knows everything, and she's trying to meet up with the Cartel tomorrow morning for her cousin. I just don't believe they're going to play fair, and it's probably going to get us both killed."

"That's no bueno," he replies.

“Right, and I assume you don’t have time to get your ass down here to back me up,” I grumble.

“I could take a plane, but that would be assuming you’re actually going to go through with the deal tomorrow, which you aren’t... Are you?”

I let out a sigh. “I don’t know. Dream is pretty persistent, and I don’t think she’s going to let this go that easily. But I’m not going to let her walk in there alone and get herself killed, that’s for sure.”

“I’ve never heard you talk like that about a woman before. She must mean a lot to you,” Jasha says, telling me what I should’ve already admitted to myself.

My voice trembles lightly as I speak. “She does.”

“Then do what’s right. If you can convince her to wait, do that. Why is she trying to go so soon, anyway?”

“They’re threatening to kill her cousin,” I reply.

“Man, she’s going to hate you if they do that. She’ll blame it on you, and technically, it would be your fault.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” I reply, feeling heat rising in my chest again. “It would be the Cartel.”

“Yeah, but you’re the one who ran off with her, trying to help get him back. She trusts you. If you let him die, she’s not going to forgive you.”

Jasha is being a lot more mature about this than I expected him to be, but then again, we’re not young men anymore. We’re both well into our thirties, and the way we see the world has changed. Women aren’t toys anymore. They’re people, and if either of us has any hope of getting married one day, we’re going to have to treat them like it and make some compromises.

I just don’t know if compromising is the right thing to do here. I’m still not convinced.

I thank Jasha anyway, telling him that I’ll keep him informed once I know what we’re doing before hanging up the phone. The hotel room falls into silence once more, and I’m left with just my fragmented thoughts and the

smell of Dream's perfume lingering in the air.

I wish she'd come back. There's so much I need to say to her, but the thing I want to tell her the most is that I'm sorry. I don't want to lose her over this.

I'm about to leave and go find her when there's a knock on the door. That's either Dream, or I have an unexpected visitor.

I pull my gun and approach the door with caution.

And then, quite suddenly, it opens.

Dream

I knew Nikolai was mad, but I didn't expect to have a gun pointed at me when I came back. I just needed to clear my head, but perhaps I didn't need to do that because a bullet would work just fine.

To my relief, his expression changes when he realizes that it's me, and he lowers his gun. "Fuck, I'm sorry," he blurts, tucking his gun into his waistband. "I wasn't sure who it was."

I hold myself in a nervous embrace. "I guess I should've announced myself, but I wasn't even sure if you wanted to see me after what I said."

"You didn't say anything wrong," he says, coming toward me and placing his hands on the sides of my shoulders. Their warmth radiates through me, and I sense a genuine apology coming.

But I don't want him to apologize. Part of me wants a rift between us to grow so that I don't have to face the reality of falling in love with a Bratva boss. The other part of me is screaming to let him make things right.

"I suppose we still need to talk about this," I say, trying to avoid getting too comfortable.

He nods. "Yes, but I would like to do it over again, without the anger. That was misplaced, and I'm sorry."

Dammit! Stop being so perfect!

I clear my throat, trying to sound confident as the walls I quickly built around my heart come toppling down again. "Yeah, that's a good idea."

I sit down on the bed and Nikolai occupies the swiveling chair by the desk. His pants ride up his thick thighs, creating a bunching of fabric at his lap, and I'm nearly at a loss for words when I see the exaggerated bulge between his legs.

Concentrate! Don't lose focus now.

I sigh, which he probably interprets as anger, but it's really frustration from

having to shift my focus away from the spectacle of his manhood. I feel silly being this drawn to it at a time like this, but if he were to bark at me to drop to my knees and suck him off as a form of apology, I'd probably do it.

I press my legs together, pursing my lips as I wait for him to speak. Time oozes by as he rubs his chin and decides where to start.

Finally, he leans forward, clasping his hands together and exhaling through his prominent nose. "We need to hash this out in a way that makes sense for both of us."

"Right, but unfortunately, I'm not willing to compromise," I reply, trying to sound firm without being bitchy.

"I understand," he replies softly.

I recoil at his words. "Wait... you do?"

He nods. "You can thank Jasha for helping me see reason. We just need to make sure we're not walking into a trap."

"I thought about that," I reply, now wanting to sound totally unwilling to see his side of things. "But what other choice do we have if we're trying to get Eddy back? If they don't intend to let him go, then it doesn't matter what we do. I guess it's just a risk we'll have to take. Or, sorry, that *I'll* have to take. I'm not forcing you to do something you think will be too dangerous."

He waves his hand through the air like he's trying to swat my words away from himself. "Nonsense," he says, straightening his back. "I'm not letting you meet with them by yourself. I'm going to be with you, but not in view. Perhaps somewhere I can act quickly if things go south. I'm assuming they will."

"Let's not assume the worst, please. This is my cousin we're talking about."

"I've agreed to go with you tomorrow morning, so I would appreciate it if you allow me to prepare for the worst, even if you want to maintain the hope that it won't come to that," he says, finally pushing back.

I seem to have found the line he won't cross, and I'm thankful it's there. I would feel weird if he just let me do anything I wanted without caring. In this

way, I know that he still wants to protect me.

“So, we’re going to do this. I hadn’t texted Diego to confirm the meeting because I wasn’t sure we’d agree to it.”

“I thought you’d do it regardless of what I said.”

I smile. “No, I still value your input. You got me this far, and I don’t want to lose you.”

“Me, or just my protection?”

I laugh. “Both.”

He smirks, and his green eyes warming up as he realizes we’re still on the same team. “Good. We’ll do this together. But I won’t let anything happen to you, so if I suspect things aren’t going the way they should, I’m going to come down on this deal so hard that Diego doesn’t have the chance to apologize before he’s eating bullets. And Jasha will be with me. I’ve arranged for him to fly in tonight.”

His words send a shiver down my spine, and I feel vulnerable under his gaze. Nikolai’s attention is intoxicating, but I have to keep reminding myself that it’s laced with danger. This man could kill someone with a snap of his fingers, yet he seems to care for me deeply.

“We’ll get Eddy back,” I say, trying to sound resolute and not impossibly distracted by Nikolai.

“We will,” he assures me, his voice low and soft. “I’ve dealt with the Cartel before. They’re not that sophisticated, and if they’re pressed hard enough, they’ll crack. We’ll get your cousin, and then we’ll make them pay.”

“I just want to get Eddy back and leave this horrible place,” I reply, shaking my head. “No more violence.”

“That’s your choice, but I also get to make mine, and that choice is to destroy the Cartel once and for all. Once Eddy is safe, we’re going to crush them. I promised Gabriel I would give him the P50, and I’m no liar.”

My heart leaps into my throat. “But we need that to trade for Eddy.”

“Relax,” he says, waving his hand to calm me down. “We’re going to give it to the Cartel just like they asked, and then they’re going to lead us to their hideout and we’re going to blast them to bits.”

“Like I said, I don’t want anything to do with them. I’m not following those fuckers and putting myself into more danger once I finish what I came here to do. I’m going back to America and staying there.”

He shrugs. “You can stay at my house, if you want.”

“We’ll talk about that later,” I say in a hurry, looking away from him because I can’t stand the level of intensity that’s back in his eyes. He wants to keep me, and I want to be his, but there’s a price to pay for that.

And I’m still not sure if I can afford it.

“Okay, let’s just focus on getting Eddy. I know he’s going to be able to help us. After that, we’ll discuss what we want to do.”

I had almost forgotten that Nikolai wanted Eddy to help him gain insight on the inner workings of the Cartel. It doesn’t seem like Eddy is in any condition to be questioned by a Bratva boss. He’s probably due for a hospital visit instead.

But I don’t want to get to arguing with Nikolai again. As long as we get Eddy back, I’m happy.

I take a deep breath through my nose, letting it out slowly. “Okay, so I should probably text Diego and confirm that we’re meeting with him.”

“Remember, *you’re* meeting with him,” he says, pointing to me. “I’m going to be with Jasha, watch the deal go down. Anything gets screwy, and we’re moving in.”

“I trust you,” I say, my gaze falling to the floor.

“You should,” he says, moving towards me. He lifts my chin with his finger, forcing me to meet his eyes again. “I would die before I let anything happen to you.”

His words send a thrill through me, but also a wave of dread. “Don’t say that,” I whisper, feeling a heavy weight in my chest where my heart should

be.

“Why not? It’s the truth.” He brushes one of the curls away from my face that I spent so long trying to get perfect before we left. Tonight was supposed to be our special night, and it was ruined by Diego.

Maybe I should feel more vengeful, but I just feel broken.

And it’s even worse because of what Nikolai is saying. I don’t want him to die for me.

“I can’t bear the thought of losing you,” I admit to him, my voice barely above a whisper. “So don’t say you’ll die for me.”

The room falls silent, filled only with the tension that has been building between us. I can feel his breath on my skin, and I can smell the mix of cologne and sweat that clings to him.

His eyes search mine, and I see the boy again.

The innocent one who doesn’t understand why there has to be so much pain in the world.

And he speaks to the girl inside me, the one who just wants to be loved.

Finally, he leans down and captures my lips with his, kissing me with a passion that leaves me breathless. It’s a kiss full of promise, full of desire, and full of something deeper that neither of us wants to put a name to.

When he pulls away, I’m left feeling like we’ve written our names in blood together. I know that we’ve crossed a line, and there’s no going back.

“We should get some rest,” he says, his voice husky. “Tomorrow is going to be a long day.”

I nod, still lost in the feeling of his kiss.

He’s right. Tomorrow we’ll be facing danger, but tonight, all I can think about is the allure of the man standing before me.

And I want him again.

This could be our last night, after all.

Nikolai

The sun is like a demon peeking through the clouds as morning arrives too soon. Dream is sleeping next to me in the car as I drive to the airport to pick up Jasha, and part of me wants to throw Dream on a plane and take her back to the United States so we don't have to go through with the deal.

But that would mean leaving Eddy to die, and I can't do that.

Everyone walks out of here alive today. We make the deal, then we start working on a plan to take out the Cartel.

I've not told Gabriel about what's going on because I can't figure out what to say. He'll pressure me to keep the drugs, and I can't do that without risking Eddy's life. We're going to have to make the trade, and then we're going to have to get them back.

I just don't think Gabriel is going to agree to something like that.

So, I haven't told him. He still thinks we're busting down the doors to the Cartel's headquarters on Monday and killing everyone inside. In and out. That's what I told him, and as far as I know, we're still doing that.

We'll just have Eddy with us for intel.

Maybe it's better this way, after all.

I look over to Dream and envy her ability to sleep at a time like this. Admittedly, I should be tired too, especially after the crazy sex we had last night, but I have no time to rest. I've been discussing the plan with Jasha for the past few hours, adamant about getting every last detail right.

There's no room for error.

My knuckles are white on the wheel, and I can almost feel the leather crumble under my grip. Every passing mile is another reminder that I can't turn back. Once we pick up Jasha, we're driving straight into Dimalona – Cartel territory.

The road is empty in front of me, but my mind is cluttered. It's never been this bad. I'm usually able to create a narrow focus, one thought, one goal to focus on.

Today, I have too many, and they're battling in my consciousness for the throne.

Dream is the most important. She needs to be safe.

And then there's Jasha. I still owe him that stupid bottle of mezcal with the worm in it.

And then Gabriel. The bastard. He's going to want his cut once we go after the Cartel.

And finally, Eddy. If it wasn't for him, I would never have met Dream. I can't blame him for the situation that he's found himself in. To do so would be to curse the connection I have with Dream.

I roll my tongue over the back of my teeth as we approach the airport. For a moment, I'm able to forget about everyone and watch one of the planes as it lands, wondering if it's Jasha's.

Dream sighs in her sleep but doesn't wake up. I wish I could be in that seat, wrapped in blissful ignorance, dreaming things that have nothing to do with drugs and violence.

But I'm the boss.

And the boss never sleeps.

I go over a speed bump just a little too fast, perhaps on purpose, and Dream finally wakes up. She jumps up in her seat, suddenly alert as we pull into the lane dedicated to arrivals. There are a few other cars, but nothing notable.

"We're already here?" she asks, looking out the window as she rubs the sleep out of her eyes.

"Yes, but we'll have to wait a few minutes for Jasha. I think he's only just landed, but he shouldn't take long unless he tried to bring something through customs that he shouldn't have."

“What would he bring?” she asks, looking toward me with wide, curious eyes.

I keep forgetting how innocent she is. Despite the fact that she got wrapped up in crime, she’s no criminal herself. She’s a normal woman who doesn’t deserve to be burdened with the knowledge of what someone like Jasha would bring across the border.

But she’s mine now, so I tell her anyway.

“Guns, maybe drugs too if he’s feeling ballsy. I just don’t want him to get himself in trouble. People can be easily bribed or threatened, but it’s still going to take time that we don’t have to waste if he gets pulled aside,” I explain, feeling annoyed at just the thought of him doing something that stupid. He’s not young anymore, but I believe he still has it in him to fuck things up.

Maybe I’m being too harsh.

Either way, I sigh when I see him come out of the building, striding toward the car with the utmost confidence. I know he’s dying to give me a hard time, but he’s going to have to watch his mouth around Dream. She deserves more respect than she’s usually given.

“Aw, you got me in the back,” he says with a chuckle, opening the door and flinging his bag inside.

“First class is taken,” I reply, shifting the car into drive before he even has a chance to climb in.

He jumps into his seat, slamming the door shut as I take off down the road. I’d like to leave this airport behind us as soon as possible. It makes me nervous to have several life sentences’ worth of drugs just sitting in the car at Dream’s feet.

“You know, they didn’t have first class on that plane, so I guess this is fitting,” Jasha says, leaning forward and grabbing my shoulder. “Motherfucker, how are you?”

I shrug him off. “Stop that, I just spoke to you, like, three hours ago.”

“Sure, but we were talking business then. Let’s get personal,” he replies cheerfully.

Dream raises an amused eyebrow at me and I shake my head. “No, let’s not get personal. I don’t want you prying into my life. You’re just here to help with the Cartel stuff.”

“That’s not what you said over the phone, when you called about the girl,” he says before I can stop him.

I groan, and Dream immediately jumps up at the mention of her. “You’re talking about me?”

I can see Jasha’s wicked grin in the rearview mirror, and I just know he’s about to embarrass me. I think he’s just jealous that I’ve found someone and he’s still hanging out at home by himself. He’d probably benefit from a woman, but he’d never admit it.

Hell, I wouldn’t admit it either, until I met Dream. After that, everything changed.

“Nikolai dragged me all the way to Mexico so that he could impress you,” Jasha says, raising his eyebrows as he catches my eyes in the mirror. “He is crazy about you. Probably too anal to admit it, but that’s the truth, on God.”

Dream looks at me, cocking her head to the side curiously, and I feel my face growing hot. I feel like I’m in high school again, but Jasha does tend to have that effect on me. He knows where my buttons are, and better yet, how to push them all at the same time for maximum impact.

I don’t say anything. I doubt there’s anything I *could* say that Jasha wouldn’t find a way to twist into something grotesquely different. Another of his talents, just not one I’m a fan of.

“Oh, but he’s a good guy,” Jasha finally says, putting his hand on my shoulder again. “And a big teddy bear if you can get through to him.”

“Aw,” Dream says, beaming as Jasha reveals everything I don’t want her to know.

“And he snores, but it’s not that loud,” Jasha adds. “Oh, and if you give him

too much coffee, he'll get grouchy from the caffeine, so you don't want to do that. One cup is more than enough."

"I'm not a dog, Jasha," I finally say. "Dream, don't take him seriously. He just makes things up to bother me."

"What have I made up? Name one thing."

Dream giggles, and I suddenly feel like Jasha isn't just trying to annoy me, he's trying to put on a show to entertain her. I guess that means she's good in his book, but I do want to keep an eye on their interactions. If he starts treating her like he treats me, I'm going to knock his teeth into the back of his throat.

Jasha settles back into his seat, impatiently clicking his tongue in his mouth. "Okay, guys, where exactly are we going? I need an ETA."

"Dimalona," I grunt.

"Specifically, Navolato," Dream says. "There's a bar there that's usually closed in the morning, but the Cartel controls it, so they'll let us in. We're trading the drugs for Eddy there." She pats the duffle bag at her feet.

"A two million dollar hostage," Jasha says to himself, shaking his head. "He'd better be worth it."

I cringe at his words because I know what's coming from Dream. I'm just glad the heat is going to be directed at him and not me.

"Eddy's life is worth more than that. More than your entire career, probably," she snaps at Jasha.

I peek into the rearview mirror to catch his staggered expression.

Priceless.

"Quite the claim," Jasha says under his breath.

Dream glares at him, but she doesn't seem to want to argue. I suppose if she's already made up her mind, there's no point in doing that. It wouldn't change her opinion, and she's not the type of woman to need validation from other people.

“We’ll be in Navolato in about an hour,” I announce, hoping they’ll settle down for a while. Maybe Dream will go back to sleep, but I doubt it with how wide her eyes are now that she’s awake.

“Is Gabriel joining us?” Jasha asks, leaning forward once again.

Dream gives him a look of pure disgust, but I know she’ll warm up to him. She was the same way with me until she realized we were on the same side.

And Jasha really isn’t that bad. I give him a hard time because he’s my brother, but his heart is in the right place...

Most of the time.

“Gabriel doesn’t know about what we’re doing,” I say, keeping my eyes on the road to avoid any funny looks from Jasha. “He thinks we’re going in on Monday, but I’m going to tell him he has more time to prepare after we make the trade, but probably not why.”

“He’s not going to like being tricked,” Jasha replies.

“We’re not tricking him. We’re just leaving some things out.”

“Like the fact that we’re trading the drugs you promised him for Dream’s cousin,” Jasha says with palpable skepticism.

“Worth it,” Dream interjects.

I sigh. “Babe, let me handle this.”

“Babe?” Jasha asks with a laugh. “I guess you two really are an item, huh?”

“What of it?” Dream blurts, turning to him and pursing her lips.

I put my hand on her shoulder and she turns back around, falling silent in her seat again. It’s endearing how defensive she is of our newfound relationship, but I don’t want too much trouble between her and Jasha. It could get in the way of our mission.

“What Gabriel doesn’t know won’t hurt him. The end result will be the same, and everyone is going to be satisfied,” I continue explaining. “We trade the drugs, then we use Gabriel’s private army to crush the Cartel and get them back. I highly doubt they’re going to sell them all off in the meantime.”

Jasha doesn't seem completely sold on the idea, but he must realize that we don't have many other options because he doesn't bring it up again on our drive to Navolato.

As we get closer, we go over how we're going to make this safe for Dream, what positions we're taking, and what to do in case things get messy. We can't prepare for everything, but we can make sure we're flexible with how we handle such a dynamic situation.

Jasha will be on the top floor of a nearby hotel, able to pick off targets with a scoped rifle if anything goes down outside the bar we're meeting at. Meanwhile, I'll be on the ground outside.

The Cartel hasn't made it easy to know what's going on inside, but Dream feels confident that it'll be as simple as bringing in the bag, dropping it off, and taking Eddy with her. That's what Diego has told her, and we just have to trust him.

But I don't trust him, not in the least, so I'm giving it three minutes.

If she's not out by then, I'm going in.

And I'm going to kill every motherfucker inside that bar, regardless of their affiliation with the Cartel.

Dream

I'm shaking so hard that my stomach is starting to hurt, but I try to hide it from Nikolai.

He drops the heavy duffle bag full of Protodafinil in my arms and steps back, looking me over. "Are you sure you can handle this?"

I nod because my throat is too dry to say yes, but even that is difficult. My neck is stiff, and I have pins and needles in my shoulders from the weight of the bag.

"Okay, you know the deal. Count the seconds in your head, because the moment it goes over a hundred and eighty, I'm coming in to get you. Has Diego texted you yet?"

I nod, but I'm unable to pull my phone out to show him because of the bag.

Nikolai puts his hand on my shoulder, and my knees would buckle if they weren't locked. "Try to look calm. If they're serious about the trade, they'll make it without giving you too much trouble. Don't let them bully you."

"I won't," I say, feeling a surge of power as I realize this is the moment I've been waiting so long for. This is when we get Eddy back. It's time to be a family again.

Nikolai's expression softens, and he lowers his voice so that Jasha can't hear it from the car. "You're very brave, Dream."

I smile at him weakly, not feeling very brave at all. Just determined.

"One more thing," he says, his voice dropping even lower. "I want you to know something. I know it's a little soon, and maybe this feels rushed, but —"

I cut off his words by jumping up on my toes and planting a kiss on his lips. I know what he's going to say, but that can wait until I'm back with Eddy. I refuse to rush through things under the assumption that I could die in there.

I won't. I will survive.

For Eddy, but also, for Nikolai.

“I’ll see you soon,” I say, turning away from Nikolai and taking my first steps away from the car.

“Be safe,” Nikolai calls out, like a troubled parent whose child is going out for their first drive by themselves.

I smile as I step out of the alley and onto the main street. Safety might not be an option, but getting Eddy back is a guarantee. I’m going to make sure of it.

I feel an unusual number of eyes on me as I walk down the busy street toward the Cartel bar. It’s probably just because I’m an American woman carrying a giant duffle bag in her arms down the street in Mexico alone, but it still makes me feel like someone is going to jump out of the crowd and steal it from me.

I hold it tighter, pulling the scratchy nylon against my chest and gritting my teeth. There’s humor to be found in the fact that I’m carrying a Schedule One drug down a public road as though it’s groceries, but I’m not in the mood to laugh at it.

Maybe once this is all over. Then, I can laugh, and I can do it with Eddy.

The bar is a looming building at the end of the street, three stories high while everything else is a single level. It’s a solid structure, the walls made of concrete and painted a pale red color.

I could imagine Diego getting angry if I called it pink, but that’s what it really is. Kind of a washed-out salmon.

It succeeds in being intimidating regardless of the color, however, because the walls feel like they’re three feet thick, and there’s nothing to indicate that anyone is welcome inside for a drink.

Like the small town we started out in, there’s no sign, no label, and everyone just seems to know to avoid it. They’re like ants making a wide detour around a pile of salt, unwilling to get too close should they accidentally find themselves yanked inside for questioning by an angry guard.

I wait for Jasha’s signal before I continue approaching the bar – a flash of red

from one of the windows at the hotel across the street. That's probably also owned by the Cartel, but it's open to the public and Nikolai managed to book a room at short notice. The Cartel cares more about making money than safety.

The sun is oppressively hot, burning the back of my neck and making my dress stick to my sweaty skin as though it were made from cling wrap. I glance up at the hotel, trying not to make it obvious that I'm awaiting a signal.

Nothing.

Nothing.

There it is! The flash of red.

I almost forget to start walking again, so stunned that we're actually doing this to do anything but stare at the window as Jasha waves a red bandana in the window. But then I remember that I only have three minutes, and I hurry off to the bar so fast that I nearly trip as I arrive at the door.

There's nobody there guarding it, but it doesn't have a handle. I'm forced to put the duffle bag on the ground and knock, hitting the wood so hard that my knuckles ache.

The door creaks open, just a fraction of an inch, and I'm met with a pair of narrow eyes framed by the dark interior. "Qué quieres?"

"Um, I'm here to meet with Diego," I say, trying to keep my voice steady, my gaze unflinching.

The door swings open, and a large man steps aside, allowing me to enter. "Vamos."

Picking up the duffle bag again, I step into the bar, scanning the gruff faces for once I recognize. Diego said he'd be the one meeting me here, but I don't see him.

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up as I walk deeper into the bar. All eyes are on me, but nobody says a word.

Am I supposed to say something?

I only have three minutes. Maybe I should've asked for more.

Suddenly, there's movement from the back, and I see Diego hurry out to meet me. He's a lot shorter than I would've imagined, and that makes him less intimidating even though height rarely has anything to do with how dangerous someone is. It's not like I would stand a chance against him if he decided to forgo a fair trade and attack me.

"Life is but a dream, eh?" he jokes, opening his arms as he comes toward me.

I hold up the duffle bag, using it as a barrier between the two of us. I don't want hugs. I want Eddy.

"I'm here for Eddy," I say, patting the bag. "And I have what you want."

"All of it?" he asks, eyeing the duffle bag.

I nod.

"Plus interest."

My blood runs cold at his words, and my mouth goes dry. The situation has already begun to unravel into chaos, and I'm not even thirty seconds into it.

"Um, you never mentioned anything like that," I say, trying to sound confident and failing miserably.

"You don't have anything you could add?" he asks, his eyes roaming over my body in a way that makes me feel violated.

"No," I reply firmly, painfully aware that we're wasting time. "I'm here to make the trade we discussed, and nothing more."

Diego breathes out sharply through his nose. "Very well..."

He snaps his fingers, and a man steps out from a doorway on the left holding a figure wrapped in a faded blue wool blanket. There are white cable ties around his waist and neck to hold the blanket in place, but I can tell from the shoes poking out of the bottom that it's Eddy. He always wears the same pair of black Vans.

My heart skips a beat, then continues hammering against my ribcage so hard that I feel like I'm on the brink of a heart attack. But I have to be strong. I've

come this far, and it's time to finish the deal and get the hell out of here.

"Let's trade," Diego says, reaching for my duffle bag.

I jerk it away from him. "Let me see Eddy first. I want to know that he's okay."

Diego mutters something in Spanish, but complies with my request, turning to the cloaked figure and snapping his fingers. The man holding him cuts one of the cable ties with a knife, the one around his neck, and pulls the blanket down to reveal Eddy's beaten and bruised face.

He's barely conscious, but the moment he sees me, his eyes light up. "Dream," he croaks, and the sound of his voice breaks my heart to pieces.

I shove the duffle bag into Diego's arms, almost hoping to knock him over, but he doesn't budge. He just unzips it, peers inside, then nods to his man, who cuts the final cable tie to release Eddy.

The moment Eddy is free from the blanket, I run to him and pull him into my arms. He's lost so much weight that he feels frail in my arms, but his heart is beating, and his skin is warm.

He's alive.

"Are you fine to walk?" I ask, looking over his dirty, bloodstained clothes.

He nods, so I take his word for it and lead him to the door, allowing him to lean on me as he hobbles toward the door. I don't look back. I don't want to see Diego or give him another chance to change the deal on me.

We both have what we want.

It's over.

"Wait a second," Diego says from behind me, his voice tinged with notes of irritation. "What's this shit?"

I continue moving toward the door, quickening my step. Whatever he's mad about, I'm sure it's nothing I want to stay and talk with him about.

"Hey, stop those two from leaving!" Diego shouts.

I break out into a run, pulling Eddy along behind me as I barrel toward the door. The man who was guarding it when I arrived tries to step in our way, but I'm not stopping for anyone.

I aim for his stomach with my shoulder, and I pray that Eddy and my combined momentum is enough to break through.

Once we're outside, Jasha should be able to cover us, but if we don't make it out, things are going to get ugly.

Nikolai

Ten seconds until I go in.

I clutch my gun hard as I walk toward the unassuming bar.

Five more.

Why hasn't she come out?

Four.

Three.

I nod to Jasha in the window. I'm going in.

Two.

One.

Fuck, I hope she's just running late, but a deal is a deal. I gave her three minutes, and not a second more. I have to go in after her.

I step toward the door, realizing only now that it doesn't have a handle. I don't want to shoot my way in, but all the windows are boarded up and I would be a fool to knock.

I pull out my gun, trying not to attract attention from the general public as I aim for where I assume the lock on the door to be.

But before I can pull the trigger, the door flies open, a cacophony of three people rolling out onto the sidewalk at my feet. I jump back, my breath hitching in my throat when I realize Dream is among the entanglement of limbs.

I grab her, simultaneously kicking the other two guys before she screams for me to stop.

Fuck, I think that's Eddy, but I have no clue who the other guy is.

"Take Eddy," Dream shouts, scrambling to her feet and shoving a scabby, underweight man into my arms.

I grab him, quickly realizing that he's not going to be able to run on his own, so I hoist him onto my shoulder like a bag of rice. He's light enough to run with him, and he seems happier with that than on his feet. He probably hasn't been fed a proper meal since the Cartel snatched him up.

I hear the crack of a gunshot echo through the street, and then screaming. People flee in every direction. I don't have time to see who shot at whom, but by the sound of it, Jasha has our backs.

"We're picking up Jasha at the rendezvous point," I say to Dream as we round the corner and disappear into the alley where the car is parked. "Get in the back with Eddy."

She shakes her head in agreement, circling around the car and getting into the other side as I lay Eddy in the back with her. He's been quiet this whole time, but he doesn't look permanently injured. With some food and antibiotics, I'm sure he'll be back to his old self in no time.

I can still hear shots piercing the air as I jump into the driver's seat of the car and pull through the alley to the next street over. I spot the back of the Cartel bar as we race past it, but there's no one there to stop us.

We made it.

We actually pulled this off.

I laugh a bit as the stress drops off my shoulders like a heavy fur blanket. "Dream, are you alright?" I ask, turning back to look at her.

She's leaning over Eddy, examining his swollen face. "I'm fine. I just want to get Eddy to a doctor."

"It won't happen in Cartel territory," I shout over the increasingly loud sound of the road rushing beneath us. "We should take him back toward the border, closer to where my territory is. That'll ensure we have protection until we can strike them down for good."

"You still want to go back there?" she asks in disbelief.

"Of course," I reply, pulling onto the highway. "That's why I put a tracking device in the bag. Diego will lead us right to their headquarters."

I can see Dream's pupils double in size through the rearview mirror. "You did what?!"

I'm not sure why she's so angry. She knows I wanted to follow them back to their headquarters. This just allows us to do that without the risk of physical proximity.

Dream groans. "Nikolai, you almost got us killed. Diego knows about the tracking device. We would've just walked out of there if he hadn't discovered it when he opened the bag. That's why we ended up running out."

"I put it..." My stomach drops when I realize my mistake. "Oh, shit. Yeah, I put it in one of the plastic-wrapped packets of P50, but I didn't tape it shut. It must've fallen out on the way there."

"I hate you," she says, shaking her head. "I really do."

I look back at her and smile. "Don't say that. We got your cousin back. That has to count for something."

"Whatever," she grumbles, turning back to Eddy. "He's in bad shape. I just want to get him fed and cleaned up."

Eddy perks up at the mention of food, and I feel a pang of sympathy for him. Whatever he went through as a Cartel prisoner can't have been pleasant. PTSD isn't out of the question, but everyone takes stuff like that differently. We'll just have to wait and see.

"We'll get him something to drink in a minute," I say. "Some electrolytes or something. We just have to meet Jasha at the park a few miles from here. He should call me when he's —"

My phone rings in my pocket, cutting me off mid-sentence. I pick it up, and Jasha answers. "A little rowdy today, huh?"

"Nothing I can't handle."

"You would've been toast if it weren't for me. I picked off like six different guys while you were running for your life."

"I had to get Eddy and Dream to the car," I reply, wondering why I even bother trying to reason with him. I know he's just going to mess with me,

anyway.

“Still on for the park? I’m heading there on a local bus. Should be about ten minutes.”

“Unless you want me to leave you in Dimalona while we head back to the border,” I reply with a grin.

He laughs. “Hey, some of the women I saw here were cute.”

“Oh, so now you want a woman?” I ask. “I thought you swore off dating after... what was her name?”

“We don’t need to bring that bitch up. Just meet me at the park. I’ll be there.”

“You sure?”

“Nikolai...”

“You can do it to me, and I can’t do it to you?”

He hangs up the phone, and I have to laugh a little at his inability to take a joke. He’s the sensitive type, so he taunts me to take the attention off himself. Every time I bring something up that makes him even the least bit uncomfortable, he gets pissed off and shuts down the conversation.

Maybe he should talk to a therapist.

“How’s Eddy doing?” I call to the backseat, not forgetting about my new passenger. He’s going to be useful for our final push against the Cartel, but that’s not why I’m asking.

I care about him. Something about him being related to Dream makes me feel like he’s part of my family too.

“He’s... okay,” Dream replies hesitantly. “But we really need to get him to a doctor. How soon can we see one?”

“I have a private physician that I can have flown in tonight. I will warn you, though, it’s a fifteen-hour drive.”

“Eddy, is that okay with you?” Dream asks him softly.

“I’m... I’m just... glad to be free,” he replies, and his voice is so weak I can barely hear it over the sound of the engine.

“We’re going to get you fixed up,” I say to Eddy. “I have the best doctor money can buy, and a private chef who will make you anything you want. Steak dinner, shrimp and grits, pizza and beer – you got it.”

“Thank you,” he says, and I can see a smile creeping onto his face. “I’ll have it all.”

Dream

Eddy nods in and out of sleep on the way to the border while Jasha makes phone calls to get a house rented for us to stay at. Nikolai doesn't want to leave Mexico just yet, but I'll do whatever Eddy wants to do, and I doubt he'll want to stay here.

I don't bother him with questions just yet, though. I just let him get his rest, which he seems to appreciate. Even the short run out of the bar seemed to take a lot out of him. The electrolytes we gave him helped, but it's going to take him a while to get back to his original self.

I can still hardly believe that we got him back. I feel guilty now for being so hard on Nikolai. He made this possible. If it wasn't for him, I probably would've gotten caught on the border and sent to prison.

And Eddy would be dead.

As the road stretches out ahead of us, each mile taking us further away from danger, the silence that settles in the car feels comfortable, not awkward.

I watch Eddy sleep, studying the cuts and bruises on his misshapen face. I can still see him through them, and I feel a sense of relief knowing that he's still there. Even if his mind is cloudy and his body is starved, he'll recover.

I know he will.

Nikolai's eyes are fixed on the road for the entire drive, his handsome face rigid against the backdrop of a darkening sky.

I want to know what he was going to say to me before I stopped him, but I won't remind him. I want him to say it when he's ready.

As the hours go on, I wrestle with the guilt that creeps into my thoughts. I'd doubted him, and worse, I'd judged him. If it weren't for Nikolai, his ruthlessness, his willingness to step into the fire for us, Eddy would be gone, and I'd be staring at the cold walls of a jail cell.

His actions were calculated yet inexplicably compassionate. I doubt I'll ever be able to thank him properly.

We drive on, swallowed by the impending darkness, yet ironically, the path ahead seems a little clearer. I want to be with Nikolai. I want him so badly that it hurts, but I won't know how he feels until he tells me.



THE HOUSE we're staying far exceeds my expectations. If this is what Jasha can get on short notice, I wonder what we'd be staying in if we had weeks to book the trip.

It's better than anything Nikolai has come up with, and that makes me think that Jasha was the one who picked the house they're living in. Nikolai might be the older one, but Jasha is clearly more artistically inclined.

"This is gorgeous," I say as I walk into the house. Nikolai and Jasha are behind me, supporting Eddy's weight like he's a drunken fraternity boy walking home after a long night with the guys.

I marvel at the architecture inside, the vibrant hues of red, gold, and light blue that mix traditional Mexican artwork with modern design.

Directly ahead, floor-to-ceiling glass doors provide an unobstructed view of the infinity pool that seems to merge with the horizon. Palm trees sway in the breeze, their leaves creating intricate patterns of light and shadow on the water.

"I'm glad you like it," Jasha says from behind me, his voice clear and chipper despite the weight he's carrying. "Nikolai never appreciates my taste in art."

"It's just a house," Nikolai says, sounding totally unimpressed.

I turn around and wave my finger at him. "You see, that's how we ended up in that shitty hotel when we first came to Mexico. You must see a difference between that place and this one."

Jasha shakes his head at Nikolai. "No class."

I stifle a laugh, mostly because Nikolai doesn't seem happy about being ganged up on, but also because Eddy is in such bad condition that it hurts my heart to be laughing in front of him. He must have suffered greatly, but we

won't know how exactly until he's feeling well enough to talk about it.

Until then, I try to keep a cautiously optimistic energy flowing through the house. It's a beautiful place, but I feel like I won't be able to fully relax until we're back in the United States.

We get settled in quickly, and the doctor arrives for Eddy soon after. He's a calm and elderly man with hands that are cool to the touch. Something about him sets me at ease. Maybe it's his eyes. They're quite lively for someone his age, betraying his slow, calculated movements.

"Dr. Waters is the best private doctor you'll find. Period," Nikolai assures me.

Dr. Waters just smiles in response and goes into the bedroom to see Eddy.

He takes Eddy's blood and runs an analysis on it as he goes through a series of other tests. After that, he hooks Eddy up to an IV and leaves him in the bedroom to print the test results.

I'm standing in the kitchen with Jasha and Nikolai when he returns with a stack of papers in his steady hands.

"Good news," he says, holding the stack out to me. "Edward – or Eddy, as you call him – is fine, aside from some issues caused by malnutrition, such as decreased cognitive function and general muscular fatigue. Those should go away within a week with a return to a regular diet."

I let out a deep sigh, one that I've been holding in my chest since I learned that Eddy was being held for ransom. "Thank you," I say, accepting the papers from him.

He smiles, the corners of his eyes crinkling with genuine happiness. "I'm happy to help. I have put Eddy on antibiotics, which will help to prevent infections for his current injuries. He needs to stay clean, though, and I would like him to change bandages regularly. Full instructions for his care are on page five," he says, tapping the stack of papers with his finger lightly.

Nikolai sees Dr. Waters out the door, thanking him several times for treating Eddy on short notice. They seem to have a good relationship, because I witness Dr. Waters refuse payment for the visit and thank him for the flight

out to Mexico.

“Always wanted to see this side of the border,” he says as he leaves.

The door closes behind Dr. Waters, and Nikolai turns back to face me. His eyes meet mine, a complicated mix of relief and unreadable emotions. For a moment, I forget to breathe.

“Thank you for helping him,” I say softly, breaking the silence.

Nikolai steps closer, his eyes never leaving mine. “It’s what had to be done,” he replies, his voice low, almost a whisper. “I protect what’s important to me, and anyone you care about is someone I care about too.”

My heart skips a beat. I suddenly realize how close we are standing, how intimate this feels, and how important his words are. Now that Eddy’s back, I can focus on what I’m feeling for Nikolai without the guilt of distraction looming over me.

“Thank you again,” I say, allowing myself to get lost in the beautiful gaze of a man who knows how to handle business, no matter how chaotic.

Nikolai’s eyes stay locked to mine for a moment before breaking away and looking past me with a frown. I turn to see Jasha coming down the hallway with a bowl of grapes in his hand.

“Maybe take that to the bedroom,” Jasha says, popping a grape into his mouth. “How about some food? I bet we’re all starving.”

I laugh, grateful for Jasha’s knack for breaking the tension, even if it annoys Nikolai. “I could eat.”

Nikolai

“We have a little problem with the tracking device, since Diego found it and most likely destroyed it. That means we don’t have a reliable way of following them back to their hideout, which also means that we can’t tell Gabriel where to send his army tomorrow,” I explain.

Jasha, who is reclined on the living room couch beside Dream, raises his hand.

“We’re not in class. Speak up,” I say.

“We can ask Eddy. Maybe he knows.”

“I would love to, but he’s still recovering,” I reply. My eyes shift to Dream. “He needs to rest if he’s going to break everything down for us with full clarity.”

“That’s right,” she says, nodding in approval. “Dr. Waters said to give him a few days, at least.”

I’ve been looking to her more often for guidance. After she pulled off the trade with Diego and managed to come out of it in one piece, I know I can count on her to keep her wits when things get tough. That’s hard to find, which is another reason why I’ve kept Jasha so close all these years. He knows how to handle Bratva business, and something tells me that Dream does too.

Jasha pulls a cigar out of his jacket pocket and lights it, immediately giving me the itch to smoke with him. I’ve gone without a cigar long enough to say I’ve broken the habit, but Jasha doesn’t seem to realize that. He fishes around in his pocket and pulls out a second one, leaning forward and holding it out to me without me having to ask.

Dream doesn’t seem to care, so I take it and fill the silence with smoke for a minute or two before continuing.

“Gabriel has been bugging me for information all morning, and I haven’t responded, so I guess he knows something is up,” I finally say. “We’re going

to have to delay this, but he's going to have a lot of questions if we do."

"You could come clean and explain things to him," Dream suggests, but her expression is doubtful. "Or, just drop this whole thing and go back to the United States. I know that's not what you want to hear, but maybe it's for the best."

"No," I say softly, but in a definitive manner. "We stirred the pot already, and they're not going to get any smaller, especially not with an extra two million dollars in their pocket. We need to strike now."

Dream takes a deep breath like she's about to say something, but stops suddenly, frowning as she looks past me toward the doorway.

I turn to see Eddy standing there, propping himself up against the frame.

"Eddy, what's wrong?" Dream asks, jumping to her feet.

"I don't need anything," he says quickly, holding out his hand to stop her from running up to him. "I just heard what you were talking about, and I think I can help."

"But... you need rest."

He laughs, and something about the combined rasp of his voice and the coldness of his tone sends a shiver down my spine. I know immediately that he's seen some serious shit when he was being held by the Cartel, probably things Dream couldn't possibly imagine.

But I can.

"Sit here," I say, getting up from my velvet chair and motioning for Eddy to sit.

He thanks me, slowly walking over and falling down into it with a thin sigh. He looks around the room, at Jasha and Dream, and then up at me. He smiles. "I don't think I've had the pleasure of a formal introduction."

I extend my hand for a shake. "Nikolai."

"Eddy," he says, shaking my hand with surprising conviction.

I'm impressed by how well he's handling being out of bed. He really

shouldn't be wandering around, per the doctor's orders, but I'm not one to police other men. I have enough on my plate with Dream.

"Eddy, don't you want to go back home?" Dream asks, still standing by the couch.

"No," he replies flatly. "Not until we're done here."

"Good man," I mutter.

Dream shoots me a look, but I already know I've won. She already got to take her risks, and now I'll take mine. It goes both ways.

Eddy holds up his finger to keep Dream from talking. "And I'll tell you why. Maybe then, you will understand where I'm coming from, and why I stole from the Cartel in the first place."

I was interested in hearing what he had to say before, but now, I'm completely engrossed, hanging on the edge of his words as he begins to break down how this all began.

"At first, it was all about the money. I mean, why else does anyone get into slinging dope?" Eddy laughs, this time with more genuine amusement. "But then I started to get a little too big, and the Cartel showed up. It was just one guy, Luis, who introduced me to the big leagues. They said I had a promising career ahead of me, so they loaded me up with stuff so pure it'd burn a hole through your lungs if you tried to smoke it. Not P50. Mostly just crack at first, but it was good stuff. I sold out quickly and they let me keep half the profits."

"You'll keep seventy-five if you deal with us," Jasha says.

I roll my eyes. "Just let him continue."

"Well, at the time I thought it was a good deal," Eddy says, smirking a bit. "Way better than what I was making as a mechanic, and I figured I didn't have to do it forever. Just a few years, and I'd be rich enough to retire. But that's when they took me to Mexico and showed me the real stuff, the Protodafinil, and then things started getting weird. Would you mind giving me a little puff of that?" He points to my cigar.

“Have the rest of it, please,” I say, handing it to him. “I really shouldn’t be smoking, anyway.”

Dream scoffs. “Eddy shouldn’t be smoking either.”

“Relax,” he says, taking a few puffs and savoring the taste for a moment. That’s got to feel good after being locked up so long.

Dream narrows her eyes and studies Eddy closely. She probably thinks he’s going to drop dead from a little cigar smoke, but he’s been through hell and lived. I think he’ll be alright.

“Okay, that’s good. Dream is probably going to scold the shit out of me after this,” Eddy says, handing the cigar back to me. “I just wanted a little bit to take the edge off, you know?”

“We’re all in trouble already, it seems,” I say, teasing Dream to see if she’ll crack. She’s been moody all morning, so I’m not sure what’s up. Maybe just her period, but I wouldn’t know. I’ve never dealt with a woman this long before in such close proximity.

Dream looks at me, smiling a little, but I can tell she isn’t terribly amused. She’s used to getting her way, and the fact that Eddy isn’t taking her side with everything is probably bothering her.

But we’re about to find out what his reason is.

Eddy adjusts his posture in the velvet chair, his skinny fingers gripping the sides as he continues his story. “They wanted me to kill someone to prove I was hard enough to push their most valuable drugs. Gang type shit, but I wasn’t into it. I just wanted to make money. It was a hard no from me, but they kept pushing, talking about how many Americans they had picked off close to the border. Naming names and showing me pictures of their victims like the only reason I wouldn’t agree to it was because I was afraid of getting caught. They couldn’t fathom that I had morals. It was beyond their comprehension.”

He runs his fingers through his blonde hair, shaking his head.

His eyes are unfocused. Distant.

“I saw things that didn’t want to see... But that wasn’t what set me off. There was one couple, two people they had killed about a decade ago while they were driving down the interstate late one night.” He looks Dream dead in the eyes. “It was your parents.”

The noise in the room drops to utter silence, and we all freeze. Even the smoke seems to stand still, locking in an intricate swirl in the middle of the room.

“What are you talking about?” Dream’s voice is barely even a whisper.

Eddy’s eyes glow, sparked with the kind of energy I’m all too familiar with.

I know what this is all about now, how things went wrong with the Cartel, but I want to know how the P50 relates to all this. He must’ve taken it for a reason.

I’ll have to wait to find out, though, because Dream’s questions are more urgent than mine.

“You know,” Eddy says, leaning further forward. “Your parents had nothing to do with the Cartel. Zilch. Absolute zero. They were good targets because they were so random. That’s how they like to do it. You see, it’s much harder to pin a murder charge on someone who has no relationship with the victim.”

“But... why?” she asks, unable to comprehend the senselessness of it.

“Because they’re evil. It took me a while to realize it, but they get off on cruelty. They wanted to drag me down, to make a devil out of a normal man, and I couldn’t do it. I spent the rest of my time with them trying to dig up more information on who specifically killed your parents. That’s when they got suspicious, stole my bank cards, drained my account, and dumped me in the desert. Which is kind compared to what they normally do, but that was only because they couldn’t prove I was actually doing anything wrong.”

He chuckles, which feels misplaced until he lets us in on the next part of his story. “But they didn’t search me before they finally dumped me. I stole as much shit from them as I could get my hands on, and I took to the United States to sell. I figured I could recoup my losses and run far away, but it didn’t take long for them to catch up to me.”

Eddy runs his index finger across his neck. “First guy tried to kill me. Just straight up. They got creative after I put their hitman in the hospital. Set me up with a fake buyer, but I didn’t bring any drugs with me. They kidnapped me anyway, and I basically had to beg them to contact Dream to deliver the drugs in exchange for my life. It was selfish, but... I don’t know. I didn’t want to die.”

“It wasn’t selfish,” Dream assures him. “You did everything for me growing up. I’d walk into Cartel territory a million times over for you, but please... don’t ask me to do that,” she laughs.

Dream is loyal. I admire that.

“I won’t ask anything more from you, just that you allow me to stay here and help take down the Cartel. Those bastards deserve it.”

“I agree,” I say, perhaps a little too loudly. Everyone looks at me, and I lower my voice. “I mean, if we don’t know who was responsible for killing Dream’s parents, then the only way we can be sure to get revenge is to eliminate all of them. Every last member of the Dimalona Cartel.”

“He has a point,” Eddy says, waving his finger at me. “But how the hell are we going to do that?”

I grin. “If you have a location, I have an army.”

Dream

I can't believe I allowed myself to get sucked into this. If it wasn't for Jasha, Nikolai, and Eddy all collectively insisting that we stay in Mexico and finish off the Cartel, I would've turned around and left yesterday.

There's also the bit about the Cartel being responsible for my parents' deaths, but that was so long ago that it feels weird to bring it up again. I'm not sure what my parents would think of me joining forces with the Bratva to take down their killers, but they're not exactly here to tell me not to.

Eddy is the closest thing to a parent that I have, and he's all for it.

So, I've decided to stay at the admittedly luxurious rental home for as long as it takes to plan the invasion of the Cartel's headquarters. Eddy has suggested to wait a full three weeks until the day after Cinco de Mayo, when most of the Cartel will be sluggish and hungover.

At first, Nikolai seemed resistant to the idea, but after calling and discussing it with Gabriel, who still believes he's getting ten kilograms of P50 in return for his army, everyone has collectively decided to go ahead with the new plan.

But now the question is, can I survive in a house full of men for three whole weeks without losing my mind?

Nikolai seems to be the first to snap, though, because one week into what must be a painfully domestic routine for him, he invites me down to the basement and locks the door, moving an old sofa in front of it for good measure.

"What on earth are you doing?" I ask as he pulls a cord to turn on the single dangling bulb in the room.

"Getting some goddamn privacy," he grumbles, shifting the couch a little further to the left so that the door handle can't turn. "There. That should keep the bastard out."

"Are you talking about Jasha or Eddy?"

“I’ll be nice and say it’s just Jasha,” he answers with a thin smile.

I laugh. “I didn’t think those two would be getting along so well. I thought you’d all gang up on me, but at least I have you on my side.”

“Two against two. An even match,” he says, leaning against the couch. His broad shoulders are relaxed, tilting to one side. He looks at ease, but there’s an underlying tension in the room, hinting at his true intentions.

He didn’t just want to escape from Jasha and Eddy for a little while.

He wanted to get me alone.

The single bulb casts dramatic shadows across his face, highlighting the stubble on his jaw and the intensity of his gaze. His crystalline green eyes catch the light, reflecting it like a gemstone would.

He seems unreal, even though I’ve touched him hundreds of times before. It may never be enough to prove that he exists. I have to have my hands all over his perfect body.

Again, and again.

“Two on two,” I say softly, allowing my eyes to wander over his imposing figure. “Maybe it should be one on one.”

A knowing smirk unfurls across his mouth. “I was thinking the same thing.”

Before I can say anything, he grabs my shirt with both hands and tears it open from the neckline all the way to the hem. It falls to my waist like a sorry excuse for a skirt, and he immediately squeezes my tits, pinching my nipples between his thumb and index finger and pulling me toward him.

“Give me those tits,” he growls, letting go and slapping them hard. “You like that, you little slut?”

I nod, biting my lip as I feel a rush of arousal. I used to hate the idea of being called names, but when Nikolai does it, I feel so good that I want to walk around the house with the word *whore* written on my forehead in sharpie.

Thankfully, he’s not asked me to do that. He likes to keep me to himself, openly admitting that he’s possessive and jealous.

“That’s right, I know you’re already wet for me,” he says, sliding his hand down the front of my pants and touching my pussy. His fingers work magic on me, and I’m panting his name in mere seconds.

He doesn’t wait for me to cum like he normally likes to do. He’s impatient this time, so desperate to get inside of me that he spins me around and yanks down my pants. He slaps my ass, and I remember the first time in the hot desert sun. It hurt so good then, and it’s twice the thrill now that I know what’s coming next.

His huge hands spread me from behind, pulling aside my panties and holding me in place while he guides his cock to my pussy. The tip slides against my labia, and I arch my back, guiding him the rest of the way in.

The first thrust causes me to tumble forward, finding support on a large cardboard box in near the wall.

His weight coming down on top of me is enough to cause the box under us to collapse withing the first few thrusts, but he doesn’t miss a beat as he presses me into the cold concrete floor and fucks me hard from behind.

I need it badly.

Clawing, scratching, aching pleasure.

I know I’m going to be sore from this tomorrow, but I live for the moment when I’m with Nikolai. I have no clue how many more chances we’ll get before we’re back in the United Sates, and past that there’s no guarantee I’ll ever see him again.

The idea of getting my heart broken makes the sex better, though, heightening my emotions as pleasure takes over my body. It’s a fucked up thing to imagine, but I can hardly care when I’m getting pounded into another dimension.

Pure, unfiltered pleasure bubbles up like a beer poured too hard, overflowing over the sides of my brain and splashing down into my body. I’m flooded by it, no longer aware of the cold, hard floor beneath me. No longer able to do anything but release the tension that’s been building in me since the last time we had sex.

Nikolai's release triggers mine. The swell of his cock, the way he groans into my ear as he pumps his cum inside of me. It's the ultimate fantasy come to life, one that I'll never get tired of.

Nikolai collapses onto me, pressing me into the floor, merging our bodies until our heartbeats unify, and the world around us stabilizes. "Fuck, you're so good," he whispers into my ear.

I shudder, my body surrendering to his words.

Dream

As the day of the big attack approaches, the banter between the guys in the house turns to a quiet tension. Eddy is mostly back to his old self again, but there's a part of him that's changed. He's more serious and mature than he used to be.

I hesitate to say that his experience with the Cartel has been for the better, but he certainly seems to have grown as a person because of it.

He's focused on the mission ahead, which is something we should share, but the gravity of it pales in comparison to what I'm facing at home.

Something that could've been prevented if I was more careful.

The calendar on my phone seems to mock me, the days between my period stretching out much longer than they usually do. It could be from the stress, but I've never been this late.

Could I be pregnant?

My eyes flicker over to Nikolai, who's huddled in the corner of the living room with a book in his hands, smoking a cigar as he tries to distract himself from the mission ahead. He's been like that for days, glued to the sofa beside Jasha. Occasionally, they'll play a game of chess, but most of the time they're just sitting in silence.

Eddy joins them quite often, but today he's outside in the garden getting some sun. He told me that, after being locked up inside for so long by the Cartel, all he wants to do is be outside. Freedom is sweeter once you've experienced the alternative.

I leave the brothers to dwell in their brooding silence and smoke, heading out to join Eddy. I did a pretty big favor for him, so I think it's appropriate to ask for something in return.

I find him lying down on his back in the grass, his eyes closed and his expression blank. The first time I saw him like this, I thought he was dead, but this time I'm worried about something entirely different.

“Eddy, can I talk to you?” I ask, my voice breaking the silence.

Without opening his eyes, he answers, “What’s up?”

“You know how I told you that Nikolai and I were kind of a thing,” I begin, weaving my fingers together.

He opens his eyes and sits up, blinking at me like he just woke up from a long nap. “*Kind of* a thing? You’re practically glued at the hip, so please tell me you’re not breaking up. That’s going to make this shit a lot more complicated.”

I shake my head. “No, no. Nothing like that.”

“Then what?”

“Well, if you’ll let me finish...”

“Okay, okay,” he says, putting his hands up. “Go ahead. I’m listening.”

I draw in a deep breath, steadying myself. “I might be... Well, probably am... maybe... pregnant?”

He gives me a look like I’m the stupidest person he’s ever met. “I’m not the least bit surprised, Dream. Like, not at all. In fact, I want you to know that I can hear you two pretty much every night, so you should probably try lowering the volume a bit.”

My cheeks flush red hot from embarrassment, but I shouldn’t really be surprised that Eddy knows what Nikolai and I have been up to. We haven’t exactly tried to hide it, and Nikolai is notorious for spanking me without checking who else is nearby.

“Well, you definitely can’t come to our little Cinco de Mayo party if you’re pregnant. Though, judging by how protective Nikolai is of you, I doubt he would’ve let you join, anyway.”

“I don’t know if I’m pregnant, and I can’t just tell him about it either,” I say.

“What do you want me to do?”

I glance over my shoulder to make sure nobody else is around, lowering my voice to keep this between Eddy and me. “Just... help me out with this. I

need to go buy a pregnancy test, and Nikolai and Jasha need to think we're just going out to get food or something."

"I guess we could do that."

"Can you also tell Nikolai that we're going to the grocery store for something? I don't know, something he doesn't like. Mushrooms or something. I'll just get in the car and wait for you."

Eddy chuckles as he gets up from the grass. "You can't even look him in the eyes. And I'm pretty sure he likes mushrooms."

"Then I guess you know him better than I do," I reply in a haughty voice as I turn and walk away.

Once inside the car, I wait with bated breath for Eddy to join me. He likes driving around, especially if I let him listen to the music he likes, so I doubt this is going to be any sort of annoyance to him.

But to me, the drive is weighing so heavy on my chest that I feel like it's going to crack my ribs. I can hardly stand the way the seconds ooze by as Eddy goes inside to inform Nikolai that we're leaving. It's even worse that I'm going to have to pee on a stick and wait for the results.

After what feels like an hour, Eddy slides into the driver's seat and pushes the key into the ignition.

"What took you so long?" I ask, buckling my seatbelt.

"I was in there for like two minutes," he replies, looking at me like I'm crazy. "I had to tell Nikolai we were going to the store, and Jasha wanted about fifteen different things."

"And Nikolai didn't want anything?"

"I asked him, and he said he wanted some peace and quiet."

My laugh comes out as a messy snort.

When Nikolai isn't busy fucking my brains out, he's acting like an old man. It's one or the other, and since I'm in the car with Eddy, he's in old man mode.

There's a charm to it, of course, but I don't even think Nikolai realizes he's doing it.

My amusement quickly fades as we hit the main road. Eddy tries to make small talk about the weather and the general vibe of living in Mexico, but I can't sustain anything more than a few comments here and there.

I'm thinking about the pregnancy. I know in my heart that I'm going to have Nikolai's baby, and I feel guilty for being a little excited about it. I don't even know if Nikolai wants to have kids. There's so much we haven't talked about, and even though he's gone from my worst enemy to my most passionate lover, things are always capable of changing.

I just don't know how he's going to react to being a father, and that's terrifying.

And because I don't know, my relationship with him is suddenly on the line, hanging by the thread of his reaction to the news. I'm not giving up our baby, and so it's up to him to choose.

Accept both me and the child, or walk away with neither.

I place my hand on my belly as Eddy pulls into a Walmart parking lot. Enough hypotheticals. It's time to learn the truth.

Inside the store, my eyes dart nervously around as if expecting someone who Nikolai knows to pop out from an aisle and report back to him. Eddy seems to sense my unease and puts a reassuring hand on my shoulder.

I give him a smile that probably resembles a grimace more than anything else.

The temperature is a stark contrast to the heat outside. By the time I find the aisle with the pregnancy tests, my entire body is covered in goosebumps. I grab the first test I see, twirling around on my heels to find that Eddy has wandered off.

He's probably off looking for the things that Jasha wanted.

I wait near the front of the store for his return, feeling like a little duck in a lake full of alligators as I shiver next to the checkout lane. I get a few strange

looks, but nobody speaks to me.

Finally, I see Eddy emerge with a cart stacked high with food and four 12-packs of diet soda. I forgot that he basically lives off that stuff. Refuses to drink water. God knows I've tried to change him, but it's proven futile.

At the counter, I can feel my face flush as the cashier scans the pregnancy test after the food, placing it in a separate bag. Eddy distracts me with idle conversation about the differences between the Walmarts and America and Mexico, but it's just noise. My mind is busy swirling in a sea of possibilities.

Back in the car, Eddy glances over at me, then at the small box sitting on my lap. I've refused to put it in the trunk. I feel like I need to have it with me the entire drive back.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asks.

I sigh. "What is there to talk about? Nikolai's life is hard enough, and a baby would make everything more complicated. I can't see how he'd be happy about this."

"Why don't you ask him?"

"Not yet," I reply, looking out the window as the buildings blur to either side of us. "He still hasn't told me that he loves me. I thought he was going to, but I stopped him, and he just hasn't said anything about it since."

"You can ask him about that, too," he suggests.

"Maybe... But I want to know the results of the test first. I need to know if I'm actually pregnant."

"We'll make it work," he says. "Whatever it comes out to, we'll make it work."

I hide my tears as we arrive back at the house, rushing out before anyone can see me and locking myself in one of the upstairs bathrooms. There, I fumble with the little pink box until the pregnancy test comes clattering out onto the floor.

"Dammit," I hiss as I scoop it up. I hope it's not broken.

I turn it over a few times in my hand, and nothing seems to be out of place. It's just a stick of white plastic with a little window on it that I'm supposed to piss on. If men had to take pregnancy tests, I'm sure they would be pine-scented with a picture of a naked woman on the front with their mouth open.

I laugh a little at how crude the idea is, but from my experience, men *are* crude. I'm never going to forget the first time Nikolai told me to lick his cum off the floor.

The keywords here being *first time*.

Maybe I just got an oddball, but he's a lovable one.

And he takes care of me. He's not the asshole I first mistook him for. He's softer on the inside. All it took was a little time and a lot of sex.

Thinking about him makes the wait easier after I'm done taking the test. The package says three minutes, and I try not to look at it for that long, but my eyes are drawn to it when the results appear in the corner of my eye.

Nikolai

“Hey, are you busy?” Dream’s voice is so quiet beside me that I barely even hear her.

I look up from my book, *The Art of War*. I’ve read it a dozen times already, but this house doesn’t have a very large library. I’ve already gone through everything else of interest. “What’s up?”

She clasps her hands together, wringing them so hard that it looks like she’s trying to get water out of them. Honestly, it looks painful. “Can we talk?” She looks over at Jasha, who’s still engrossed in a copy of some trashy romance novel. “Alone...”

My heart skips a beat when I think about what this could be about. Did I do something wrong? Is she sick? Does she just want to have sex again? She looks awfully nervous, so I doubt it’s that.

Maybe she broke something of mine, but everything I have is replaceable.

Perhaps a text from Diego?

I set my book aside, marking the page with an old receipt. “Of course. Let’s go to the study.”

Dream looks relieved as she follows me, but her face still holds a certain kind of dread that I can’t quite place. With the date for the attack on the Cartel headquarters rapidly approaching, her face is making my stomach twist tight with anxiety.

I open the heavy wooden door and flick on the light. There’s a delay before the light comes on, but once it does, it reveals a beautiful unused study with leather chairs and an antique coffee table. There’s a bit of dust around, but nobody should bother us here. Something tells me that we need extra privacy for the conversation we’re about to have.

I sit down, the leather creaking as I sink down into it.

Dream remains standing, still wringing her hands as she looks around the room.

“What’s on your mind?” I ask.

She looks at me, then her eyes dart away. She opens her mouth to speak, but closes it a moment later.

Silence falls between us like a curtain. The anticipation is going to kill me.

“This... This isn’t easy for me to say,” she begins, looking everywhere but my eyes.

My mind races. Is she unhappy? Is she going to leave me? “You can tell me anything, you know that.”

“I know, I know. It’s just...” She takes a deep breath. “It’s just that this might change everything between us.”

A thousand different scenarios run through my head. None of them are good. Whatever it is, it’s big and has the potential to ruin us forever. I can feel the walls coming up over my heart to protect it, brick by miserable brick.

“Take your time, Dream,” I say softly, trying to mask the urgency and dread I feel. “I’m here for you, no matter what.”

She nods, her eyes meeting mine as if she’s looking for something—approval, love, commitment? I don’t know. But whatever it is, I hope to God she finds it, because the suspense is killing me.

She opens her mouth to speak, and at that moment, there’s a knock on the door. We both jump at the noise.

“Who is it?” I ask, my voice coming out deep and firm.

“Jasha.”

“Unless someone is dying, please go away.”

“Just wanted to know if I should put a beer in the fridge for you,” he says, sounding just as annoyed as I am.

I sigh. “Yeah, go ahead. Thanks.”

Jasha’s footsteps fade as he walks back down the hallway, and I turn my attention back to Dream. “Sorry about that.”

She laughs, shaking her head. “He really does know how to spoil an important moment.”

“That’s what brothers do.”

She nods, and the room fills with silence again, heavy with unspoken words. Whatever she has to say, it feels like the moment before a storm. And although I don’t know what’s coming, I know that whatever it is, it will change us.

Forever.

“I’m pregnant,” Dream blurts, and her words hit me like a thousand bullets.

If I wasn’t sitting, I would fall to my knees from the impact.

I swallow hard, but there’s something stuck in my throat that won’t allow me to speak. My mind goes blank, and then it’s filled with a million thoughts that are fighting each other to be the one that passes through my lips first.

“I know it’s a lot right now, especially considering what we’re about to do,” she says, filling the awkward silence with her own words. “And I’m sorry for jumping this on you so suddenly. I just thought it’d be unfair not to tell you.”

“Don’t apologize,” I’m finally able to say. “Don’t ever apologize for anything, Dream. You’re perfect.”

She blushes, pushing her hair back behind her ear and looking down at her feet.

“Come. Sit here with me,” I say, scooting over and patting the couch.

She shuffles over to me, avoiding my eyes again as she sits down. I can hardly believe that I’m not just sitting next to the woman of my dreams, but also our baby. I’m blessed well beyond what I deserve.

I put my hand on top of hers, holding it in her lap until I feel her pulse slow down. “I’m with you, Dream. I know I haven’t made that very clear since we started seeing each other, but I want you to know now. I will do everything in my power to keep us together.” I glance down at her belly. “All three of us.”

Tears well up in her eyes as she looks at me. “I was afraid that you would say

something totally different. That you would see me as a burden.”

I’m tempted to be offended by her concern, but I know if it were someone else, a man without the values that I have, that she’d be a single mother.

Life is cruel, and so am I, but not to Dream. I want to be her hero, her protector, and her lover. If I fail at any one of those, I’m not worthy of speaking her name.

“You’re not a burden,” I assure her, placing my free hand on her stomach. “Neither of you are. I’m going to make sure you have everything you need.”

“All I really need is you.”

My heart quickens at her words, and I feel warmth in my chest unlike anything I’ve felt before. She’s so perfect and so pure that I almost feel guilty for calling her mine.

But I must have her. Her perfection is the ultimate drug, and I could never give that up.

“I wanted to tell you something before,” I say, giving her hand a gentle squeeze. “And I hope you won’t find it inappropriate for me to say now.”

She tilts her head, looking at me with such unbridled intensity that it takes my breath away. “What is it?” she asks, but I think she already knows the answer.

“I feel like it’s too little, too late, considering your news,” I say softly, “but maybe it’s time for me to say it. I know we had a tough time in the beginning, but you should know that I’m so madly in love with you. It’s been that way for a while, really, but I always felt like it was too much to admit to you. That maybe you wouldn’t feel the same, and that terrified me.”

“I didn’t think you were capable of being afraid.”

I laugh. “Most of the time, I’m not, but when it comes to you... There’s just so much I don’t want to lose.”

“You won’t lose me,” she says, pulling her hand from her lap and touching my cheek. I feel the warmth radiating from her fingertips and spreading across my face.

Her eyes widen, shimmering like diamonds with tears that threaten to spill over. “I’ve felt the same about you, even when I was terrified of what you could do to me. I couldn’t admit it to myself at first, but now I know that I love you, Nikolai.”

I lean in closer, my lips hovering just above hers, breathing in the scent of her as I experience infinity at the brink of her passion. “I’ve spent years building walls around my heart, fortifying myself against the world. But with you, I want to tear them all down. I want to be vulnerable, if it means experiencing your love.”

She closes the distance between us, her lips pressing into mine and crushing any doubt that anything could come between us. I wrap my arms around her, pulling her close to feel her body against mine. It feels like I’ll never be able to get enough.

We break away for air, but our foreheads remain touching, our eyes locked together with such intensity that it feels like our souls are connected.

“Is it crazy that even though we’re about to go to war with the Cartel, I feel like the luckiest woman in the world right now?” she whispers.

“Maybe it is, but that would just mean you’re as crazy as me.”

Dream

Gabriel knows how to make an entrance. His voice booms down the hallway as he enters through the front door, like he must make his presence known to everyone in the house, should they be angry if they miss out on the opportunity to see him.

I'm drawn out of the living room to meet him as Nikolai and Jasha welcome him into our little temporary paradise. I'm sure he's used to luxury, but he acts impressed by the place, nonetheless, laying thick compliments on Jasha's choice of accommodation, and handing him a bottle of mezcal with a worm in it.

"Is that real?" I ask, grabbing everyone's attention as I walk up to the four men standing in the hallway. I can see Gabriel now, and he's not at all what I expected. Standing almost as tall as Nikolai and Jasha, his appearance is more akin to an orchestra conductor than a man who manages a private army.

"You must be the woman I've been hearing so much about – the breathtaking Dream," Gabriel says, extending his hand. "And yes, the worm is real. It's actually a maguey larva."

I take his extended hand, and he lays a kiss on the back of mine.

"Always putting on a show," Nikolai says with an obvious undertone of jealousy.

Gabriel winks at him. "Not as much as you, my friend."

"Let's just get down to business. Whiskey or wine?"

"Tequila?"

"Only on the weekend," Nikolai says in a way that leads me to believe he's serious and not joking.

"Whiskey, but put it on the rocks. It's hot today," Gabriel says, stepping further into the house. "But I'll tell you what, the day after Cinco de Mayo is going to be a real scorcher."

“Indeed,” Nikolai agrees, closing the door. “I will show you the lounge. Jasha, please get us a couple of drinks.”

Jasha narrows his eyes at Nikolai, but sensing the gravity of the meeting, doesn't protest. He slinks off to the kitchen, his wide shoulders swaying side to side as he walks proudly with his new bottle of mezcal.

Men can be so easy to please. It's cute.

Nikolai, Eddy, and I gather with Gabriel in the lounge, sitting around a circular table adorned with a mosaic of colorful tiles. Nikolai hands out cigars, which I decline, and we wait for Jasha to return from the kitchen to start the meeting.

Jasha reappears a few minutes later, balancing a tray with crystal glasses and a fresh bottle of bourbon on the palm of his hand. He sets the drinks on the table, serving Gabriel first, then Nikolai, then Eddy, before finally placing a glass of water in front of me.

Nikolai takes a long sip of his whiskey before setting the glass back down, his eyes wandering across the table to Gabriel. “We have a location, a date, and more money than you really deserve for a mission like this. All we need is your army.”

Gabriel chuckles, stroking his clean-shaven chin. “It's not money I'm after, Nikolai. It's the drugs.”

“All the same in the end,” Nikolai says with a shrug.

“Not really. I'm planning on keeping a sizable portion for myself, so that it can be purified, studied, and duplicated. I'd like to see the product before we begin. Do you have it with you now?”

The hair on the back of my neck stands up as Nikolai reaches into his jacket pocket. I almost expect him to pull a gun and shoot Gabriel dead for calling him on his bluff, but instead, Nikolai pulls out a small packet of something wrapped in tissue and a blue rubber band.

He lays it on the table, sliding it toward Gabriel. “A sample. Consider it a gift.”

How did he get that? Is it genuine?

Nikolai reaches under the table and squeezes my thigh as Gabriel opens the packet, presumably to assure me that everything is fine. I'm still tense, unable to relax until Gabriel takes a big sniff of the drug and smiles. "Ay, these are some good *drogas*."

Nikolai smirks. "Don't get carried away. We still need to discuss the main event."

Gabriel's face turns serious. He puts the packet back down on the table and swaps it out for his glass of whiskey. Taking a sip, he tilts his head down and looks Nikolai in the eyes. "I have five-hundred men at my disposal, but we don't need that many for what we're about to do. If you have a location, we can just as easily send them a little surprise. Something that goes *boom*."

Eddy leans forward, placing a hand on the table and tapping his index finger on the tiles. "They're occupying a small town just north of Dimalona. They've converted an old elementary school into their headquarters, and a few buildings down the street house most of their weapons and drugs."

"How many would you say are living at the compound currently?" Gabriel asks.

"A few hundred to a thousand," he replies. "But that's a rough estimate. They come and go as they please because they control the whole town."

"Any civilians there?"

"None that I saw. Maybe a few women that the Cartel use for company."

I frown. "Prostitutes? Are we going to help them?"

Eddy laughs, but quickly goes back to being serious when he sees my face. "Oh, no, Dream, I don't think you understand. They're definitely there for the money, but they can shoot back just the same as any of the men. They're loyal to the Cartel."

"Not victims, in other words," Nikolai grumbles.

Gabriel nods in agreement, which makes me feel better. I don't want to end up hurting innocent people, but there seems to be a severe shortage of them

where we're staging the attack.

"Are they using the headquarters to sleep, or is that somewhere else?" Gabriel asks Eddy.

"Same place. It's a pretty large building. Three floors."

"They all fall the same way," Gabriel replies with a smirk. "If we're going to school, I think what we need is a school bus. Except we're not putting kids in that thing. We're putting bombs."

"Sounds a bit messy," Jasha says, taking a sip of his drink.

"It'd be messy to charge in there and attempt to gun down a thousand people. Make no mistake, though, that we will be gunning people down. Once they realize they're under attack, they're going to scatter. We need to locate and cover every possible exit they have so that we can set up soldiers to take out the ones who survive the blast."

I feel nauseous from all the talk of death and destruction. Nikolai seems to know this intuitively and squeezes my thigh again, but it's not enough to stop my stomach from churning.

Just the idea of killing people, however wicked they are, makes me feel guilty. In nine months, I'm going to be bringing life into the world, and here we are, planning on how we can take lives away. The contrast is jarring in a way I wasn't prepared for.

I take a sip of my water, trying to calm my body down. I know we have to do this. Everyone wants to, and it'll be for everyone's benefit once the Dimalona Cartel is gone. I can't forget that they were the ones who killed my parents, even if my emotional wounds are long past healed.

"They're messy and unorganized, so this can't be too difficult," Eddy says. "Jesus, it's a miracle they've made it this far."

"It's because nobody wants to be the one to defy them," Gabriel replies, taking a sip of his whiskey. "Every time someone crosses them, the Cartel overreacts and kills their entire family." He points to me, keeping eye contact with Eddy. "You're lucky they didn't just hop across the border and kill your cousin. Very lucky."

Eddy gives me an apologetic look. “Yeah, we’re all lucky, but luck only gets you so far. We have to take these motherfuckers down before they ruin more lives.”

“They’ve overstepped, and now they’ll be punished for it,” Nikolai says, his voice loud and firm. “Nobody screws around with the Bratva like that and gets away with it. We have to make an example of them.”

“I’m all for it,” Gabriel says, a smirk dancing on his thin lips. “I see no downsides.”

“Then let’s make it happen,” Nikolai says.

The rest of the meeting is filled with technicalities, small details, and plenty of questions directed toward Eddy. He knows a lot about the Cartel from the time he spent behind bars in their compound, and he’s eager to share it with the group.

I don’t have much to say, but I listen. I need to know what Nikolai is getting into, and to warn him if he tries to do anything too dangerous. I need him around.

If not for me, then for the baby.

Once the talk is over and Gabriel is in the kitchen with Jasha, well out of earshot, I ask the question that’s been burning in my mind since the beginning of our meeting. “How did you get the P50 to give him as a sample?”

“Skimmed a bit off your supply to balance out the weight of the tracking device. I thought they might weigh the bag, so it had to come up as ten kilograms,” Nikolai replies.

I’m impressed by the thoughtfulness of his plan. It would’ve worked wonderfully had the tracking device not been so quickly discovered. I suppose not everything works out the way it’s planned. We’re lucky when just one thing goes the way we want it to.

“You seem to have everything so perfectly thought out,” I say, touching his arm lightly. “I can’t think of anyone better to raise a child with.”

His smile lights up the room, and the wrinkles that appear at the corners of his eyes make my heart melt. “That’s all I really want to do now, Dream,” he says, grabbing my waist and pulling me to his hip. “Once we get this mission over with, I’m taking a break from business. I’ll have Jasha handle everything, and you’ll get all the attention and care that you need.”

I raise an eyebrow at the boldness of his claim. “Are you sure about that? I’ve never seen you not be in the mood to work.”

He shrugs. “I’ll try my best. I just want you to be happy.”

“I *am* happy. As long as you’re with me, Nikolai, I’m the happiest woman alive.”

“You don’t know how much it means for me to hear that,” he says, his eyes watering a bit. “And I want you to know something. I know I’m a bit late on this, like everything else, but I’m sorry for being so needlessly cruel to you when we first met. You threw me off guard, and I didn’t know how to handle what I was feeling.”

I shouldn’t accept an apology so quickly, but it’s impossible for me to hold anything against Nikolai. I wasn’t exactly an angel toward him when we met, either.

I kiss him softly on the lips, playfully crinkling my nose at him. “Apology accepted.”

Nikolai

Jasha is the one who enjoys having parties all the time. I used to, but age has changed me, and I'm much more focused on navigating my new future with Dream and the new addition to our family.

Cinco de Mayo passes for me like any other day. Without a drink. Without a smile.

Jasha is the one who has trouble with it. He wants to be home celebrating before we've even started our mission.

Meanwhile, Dream wants me to stay home with her. She's tried just about everything under the sun, but I'm not staying at home. Jasha needs me. Gabriel needs me. And I want to make damn sure that every single member of the Cartel is dead before we head back to the United States.

Then, and only then, I will celebrate.

"I sure hope that P50 isn't in the building they're using as their headquarters," Jasha whispers to me so that Gabriel can't hear it.

I hold my finger up to my lips to silence him. Gabriel will get what he wants, one way or another. If I have to pay triple for another ten kilograms of Protodafinil, I will. I intend to clear all my debts and leave this country with no unfinished business.

I tuck a pistol into the holster on my hip, following it up with another on my shoulder holster, and then a rifle across my chest. We're mostly going to be using the guns from a series of armed vehicles that Gabriel is supplying, but I've learned never to go out in public without a gun.

And if you're walking into Cartel territory, you'd better take several.

Jasha is the first one out the door, followed Gabriel. Eddy has agreed to stay behind to watch over Dream at the house, a compromise that felt necessary considering Dream's pregnancy. I wouldn't want to risk her anyway, but considering the baby, the chances that I'd take her on a mission like this are absolutely zero.

Eddy wasn't too thrilled to be held back, but he's still recovering from his time as a prisoner, and when I informed him of Dream's pregnancy, he finally agreed to stay with her. She insists she'd be fine on her own, but that's irrelevant.

I'm the one who makes the rules, and I won't take risks with someone so precious.

I wait in the doorway for her, pretending like I'm messing around with some strap on my shoulder holster, but I really can't leave without seeing her one last time. She already fucked me like crazy last night, but it can never be enough.

After a moment, she comes hurrying down the hallway in a robe, frowning at me like I was about to leave without saying goodbye. "Are you guys leaving already? I thought you were going later."

"The Cartel's Cinco de Mayo party ended an hour ago, according to the eyes we have on their settlement. Our plane takes about two hours to get to the drop zone, and we're moving in immediately when we're on the ground," I explain.

She's in the middle of a yawn when she realizes what I just told her. "What?! You're not jumping out of a damn plane, Nikolai. Tell me you're not."

I shrug. "I'm not."

She groans. "Can't you guys drive? Or at least land first?"

"Driving is too long, which you already know. And landing in the airport in Dimalona with the amount of weapons we have is a one-way ticket to prison. Better to jump and let the plane turn around than to risk getting searched at the airport."

"It should be a private strip, though, right?" she asks, desperate for an alternative to jumping.

"Not *our* private strip. That's the difference. Look, you're not going to be the one jumping out of a plane. I've done this dozens of times in the past. It's not as scary as it sounds."

“It doesn’t sound scary, Nikolai. It sounds suicidal.”

“Just trust me, darling. I’ll be home soon. Maybe you should try to get some more sleep. It’s too early to be up and wandering around the house like this.”

She glares at me. “I would love to sleep, but you don’t make it easy.”

I pull her toward me, laying a kiss on her forehead. “I promise I’ll be back.”

Jasha is already yelling at me from the car to hurry the fuck up, and I know it’s better to listen to him than risk being left behind. I kiss Dream again, deeply on the lips, but not deep enough for her to believe this is the last time we’ll see each other.

I’ll be back.

I have to be.

I have a baby to raise and woman to marry.



THERE’S A PARTICULARLY rigid sort of tension in the atmosphere as our little steel tube full of guns and ammunition lifts off the runway. Inside, we’re braced for a relatively short ride in silence before the drop.

I’m supposed to be focused on the mission ahead, but violence is something I’ve dealt with an uncountable number of times before. Becoming a father is something totally new to me, and it’s been occupying my mind since Dream broke the news. I can’t think about anything else.

I already want to be a better man because of it, but I need Dream’s help. I don’t have the skills to raise a child. I can barely keep Jasha out of trouble, and I’ve lived with him my entire life. A baby sounds like a far greater challenge.

But I can’t forget that I’m not alone. I have Dream, and she’s the most loving woman I’ve ever met. I’m certain she’ll make a fantastic mother. I only hope I can come close to caring for people the way she does.

Empathy. It’s something that was foreign to me before I met her. It’s not like

I never had it, but it's the kind of thing you learn to cover up and forget about when you're in the Bratva. I'm only just now accepting that I can have a heart and be a boss at the same time.

But as the plane door opens and the wind rushes in, it freezes my heart. Any empathy I could've had for my opponents is swept away, and as I find myself falling through the sky toward the dry, cracked ground of Dimalona, I only have one thing on my mind.

Killing.



GABRIEL AND JASHA land together about ten yards to my left as I tear the straps from my parachute off my chest. I sling my rifle around to the front, gripping it tightly as I tread the tall grass toward Jasha.

“Nothing like a good freefall,” Jasha says with a wild grin.

“You should've opened up sooner. I thought your parachute was malfunctioning.”

He shrugs. “Just living for the thrill, I guess.”

It annoys me how careless he can be, but I was his age once, and I understand that feeling of immortality. It's like nothing can touch you, and because you don't have anyone to come home to, you don't really care much about coming home. Life is just one big adventure, a game of power and money, and nothing else matters.

For me, things have changed, but I suspect it's going to be a while before Jasha finds a woman who could convince him to be more prudent. He doesn't trust people as a rule, and I can't blame him, but not everyone is bad.

Dream isn't, but then again, it took me half my life to find her.

“Just don't get sloppy when we're at the compound. I don't want to take you home in a body bag.”

“Too heavy for you? You know, muscle weighs more than fat.”

“On second thought, I might toss you onto the bus with those explosives.”

We split up, each going in a different direction to our assigned post around the compound. The sun is only just starting to rise, and our positions will be given away if we don't act quickly.

I take my position at the front of the compound, ten yards from the main entrance. There are a few guards visible out front, but they're not going to be able to stop the remote-controlled bus once it comes barreling through the front gate. I'm hoping it'll even squash a few on the way in.

After a few minutes sitting in silence with Gabriel's soldiers, I hear the rumble of an engine. It increases in volume and intensity as it approaches, and once it's close enough to the front gate to be noticed, it screams through the entrance, using retrofitted bars on the front grill to smash through gate.

I already hear shouting, but it's nothing compared to the sound of the bright yellow school bus as it speeds off toward the headquarters building at the center of the settlement.

A loud boom reverberates through the air, shaking the ground beneath my feet as the bus explodes inside the compound. Fire and smoke billow high, pieces of shrapnel scattering in all directions. The explosion serves its purpose—creating a blinding, disorienting cover for us to use as people spill out of the compound.

I rush forward, my boots barely making a sound on the ground as I close in on the compound with the rest of the soldiers. The guards are in complete disarray, shouting and scrambling for their weapons.

Perfect.

I shoot two down before anyone else has the chance to fire, and then the air is filled with the sound of gunfire. It's a mixture of the relatively quiet pop of rifles and the deep, grating churn of bullets from the armored vehicles behind us.

In the chaos, I find peace.

Jasha's voice crackles through my earpiece after only two minutes. “West side clear. Moving to the rendezvous point.”

That's my signal to wrap this up and leave. I gun down a straggler as he attempts to crawl through the sea of bodies at the entrance, and then I turn and head back toward the armored vehicles.

My job here is done. Most of the Cartel members are dead, and the ones who aren't will be cleared out of the compound by Gabriel's soldiers. Later, they will find the P50, assuming it hasn't all been sold, and Gabriel will be satisfied.

All that's left is to return home to Dream.

My sweet Dream. My one and only.

The trip home is longer than I'd like it to be, but spirits are high. Jasha is laughing with Gabriel, but all I can think about is Dream. I don't care about the Cartel, nor the major victory we've had. All I care about is getting home and holding Dream in my arms again.

She's all that matters.

Jasha grabs my shoulder, shaking me as our plane lands. "Come on, man, lighten up. What's the matter?"

I look at him and laugh through my nose. "Nothing's wrong, Jasha. I'm just thinking how everything has changed. I'll tell you more about it when we get back to the States."

"It's about Dream, right?"

I nod. "Everything is about her."

"Jesus, man, you're really starting to freak me out."

"It's nothing bad. Things are just going to be different," I assure him, patting him on the back. "You're going to have to do more for the business. I suspect I'm going to have my hands full."

He shrugs. "Been wanting to get more involved, anyway. I think we could benefit from having a fresh set of eyes watching over everything. Someone who has more energy."

I sigh. "Jasha, I'm not retiring. I just want you to do more. I'm also not an old

man, so stop implying that I am. I could beat you in a fight any day.”

He scoffs. “Not a chance.”

As much as I’d love to prove him wrong, I don’t want to come back to the house fighting. All I want is a warm welcome from Dream and another night in bed beside her.

Or on top of her. That would work too.

Arriving home, Dream jumps into my arms the moment I open the door, burying her face in my chest. Her warmth is infectious, seeping into my bones and taking over my body. Everything just feels right with her.

I let out a deep sigh, holding her as close as I can and sinking into her softness.

It’s over. God, it’s all over, and we can finally start our family in peace.

Dream

I waddle through the garden as the sun dips low on the horizon, casting long shadows on the dirt path between hydrangea bushes. The late afternoon air is thick with the sweet scent of new spring flowers.

Nikolai stands a few feet in front of me, watching as I slowly come toward him. He's dressed more casual than usual, wearing blue jeans and a white t-shirt, but the aura of authority remains. I think it's even grown stronger since learning that he would soon become a father.

He chuckles as he watches me, his arms crossed over his broad chest. "I feel like these walks take longer every day, but I'll forgive you since you're so adorable."

"Adorable? I feel like a penguin," I reply, laying my hand over my round belly.

"Penguins can be adorable," he says, walking over to me. He places a gentle hand over mine on my belly, his eyes softening. "How are you feeling?"

"Ready to not be pregnant anymore," I sigh. "But also excited. Nervous. You know, all the feelings."

As if the baby can hear me, I feel a tightening sensation around my belly. It's like a band of tension, growing stronger every time it happens. I wince, gripping Nikolai's arm.

"Contractions?" he asks with a look of concern.

"Yeah, but they're not too bad. I mean, it's manageable."

Nikolai leads me to a nearby stone bench and helps me sit down. He takes his phone out to start timing the contractions.

"Another contraction?" he asks as I wince.

"No, not yet... there's not coming that frequently – oh!"

"Contraction?"

I nod, and he notes the time on his phone.

Several minutes pass. I try to focus on my breathing, just like we learned in those prenatal classes Nikolai insisted we attend even if he had to rearrange his entire schedule around them. But it's difficult. This is my first baby, and although I'm more prepared than most women are, thanks to Nikolai, I'm still nervous as hell.

"Just breathe, babe. In and out," he says softly.

The contractions come and go, some a dull ache, some a little sharper, each one a reminder that life is about to change in the most profound way.

Just when I think maybe it's a false alarm, I feel a warm gush between my legs. My eyes widen in realization. "Nikolai, my water just broke."

Nikolai is a man who has faced life and death decisions, who has run a criminal empire with an iron fist, but I see a flicker of... something... cross his face. Nervousness? No, it's more than that.

He's afraid.

"It's time," he says, his voice rising in pitch.

"Then we should go. The hospital bag is already in the car," I say, trying to stand up and take the initiative. If he starts panicking, I need to be able to take charge.

But Nikolai doesn't panic. The fear in his eyes is only temporary, and he helps me up, his hands firm yet gentle.

He dials a number on his phone. "Jasha, bring the car around to the garden. It's time."

Jasha drives through the grass, seeming almost as giddy as Nikolai is that I'm finally having the baby. Nikolai takes the wheel, and Jasha sits beside me, making sure I don't topple over as Nikolai swerves through traffic.

The drive to the hospital feels like the longest and shortest trip of my life. Nikolai keeps talking to me, asking if I'm alright, reminding me to breathe. His deep voice is a calming presence amidst the building pressure of contractions.

We reach the hospital, and Nikolai jumps out of the car without even turning it off, rushing to the passenger side to help me out. We're met with a wheelchair from a nurse, and I find myself being wheeled into the maternity ward, Nikolai beside me every step of the way. Jasha stays behind to park the car.

Once in the delivery room, Nikolai allows the doctor to take over. He stays in the room with me, however, his presence keeping me grounded amidst the pain.

As the contractions become more intense, Nikolai holds my hand, whispering encouragements into my ear. "You're doing amazing, Dream. You're such an amazing woman."

Everything after that is lost to me. People are rushing around the room as I experience the most painful yet beautiful thing imaginable – giving birth. The moment comes quickly, and a few seconds after a final, excruciating push, I hear the most beautiful sound in the world.

Our baby is crying.

Nikolai leans over me, his eyes glistening with tears. "You did it, Dream."

I laugh from sheer joy as a nurse places our little baby girl into my arms. I look down at the tiny, precious life we've created, and I'm filled with a love so overwhelming, it leaves me breathless.

EPILOGUE

Dream

The atmosphere in Nikolai's backyard is surreal, laden with the aroma of summer rain and freshly cut grass. The yard is soaked in the golden rays of the late-afternoon sun. The sight alone is breathtaking, but what makes it truly perfect is the man standing beside me and the little bundle of joy I'm holding in my arms.

Nikolai glances over at the grill where Eddy and Jasha are trying to figure out the intricacies of outdoor cooking. He laughs. "Are those two really still struggling with that grill? We could've been eating an hour ago."

"Be patient," I reply, shifting Lila on my hip. "They're getting the hang of it... sort of." I watch as Eddy accidentally flips a burger off the grill. "Okay, maybe not. But they're trying."

"Jasha was supposed to be taking pictures, but it seems like he has other ideas," Nikolai mumbles.

"Pictures of what?"

There's a sudden shift in the energy, something that's palpable yet indescribable.

Nikolai turns to me, his bright green eyes meeting mine and his expression changing drastically. It's a look I've seen from him before, deathly serious but brimming with compassion. I remember it from when he told me he loved me for the first time.

The next thing I know, he's going down on one knee. Right here in the grass, and I know how he hates getting his nice slacks all wet from the soil.

"Dream," he says, his voice steady and sure as he pulls a red velvet box from his back pocket.

I gasp, gripping Lila harder.

"You've changed my life in the best possible way. I can't imagine a life without you or our beautiful daughter. Will you make me the happiest man alive, and marry me?" He opens the box, displaying a glittering diamond

ring.

I feel like I'm floating. The world blurs around me, narrowing down to this single, extraordinary moment. Lila seems to sense the gravity of the situation, letting out a delighted squeal as if urging me to say yes.

Snapping back into focus, I feel the tears start to well up in my eyes. "Yes," I manage to say, my voice strained with emotion. "Yes. A million times, yes!"

Lila lets out another squeal as Nikolai stands up and slips the ring on my finger. He takes her from me and kisses her on the cheek, smiling so hard that his nose crinkles. "Mommy and daddy are getting married," he says, kissing her again.

"Did we miss it?" Jasha's voice floats over the lawn toward us as I adjust the ring on my finger.

Nikolai rolls his eyes. "You were supposed to take pictures."

"You jumped the gun," he responds, abandoning the grill and walking over with Eddy. "You could've waited."

Nikolai looks at me and shakes his head. "I've waited long enough. This woman deserves a ring." He looks back at Jasha. "But go ahead and take a picture. I want to remember this."

I stand beside Nikolai, gripping him so tightly that he has to pry my hand looser so that I don't crush his organs. Lila laughs the whole way through. She loves having pictures of her taken, especially when she's with her daddy.

"I love you," Nikolai whispers into my ear. His voice is so soft, so filled with emotion, that I can't help but feel overwhelmed. Overwhelmed by the love I feel for this man, and overwhelmed by the beautiful family we've created.

"I love you too," I whisper back as Jasha snaps a dozen or so pictures of us.

We stay like that for a moment, the three of us savoring this sacred moment in time. As I look up into Nikolai's eyes, then down at our daughter who's now happily chewing on my dress, I'm struck by a realization.

For so long, I've been living in a sort of dream, waiting for the day when the reality of my life would catch up to how I wanted it to be. But as I stand here,

amidst the intoxicating scent of summer and the golden rays of a setting sun, I realize that this is no longer a dream. This is my life—beautiful, perfect, and better than anything I ever could have imagined.

And as the sun finally disappears behind the treetops, casting its long shadows over our little family, I know with absolute certainty that the best is yet to come.

This is real, and it's only the beginning.



JASHA IS OVERJOYED to see his brother end up with the woman of his dreams, but it also leaves him feeling incomplete. He swore he'd never fall in love, but years later, he finds himself falling for a woman who has the potential to change everything... Read Jasha's Baby to find out what happens!