



Savage
BEAUTY

ANGELS & BRUTES BOOK TWO

CARA BIANCHI

SAVAGE BEAUTY

ANGELS & BRUTES BOOK 2

CARA BIANCHI

Copyright © 2023 - Cara Bianchi

Cover © 2023 - @covers_by_wonderland (Instagram)

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the Author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

AI Disclaimer:

The Author expressly prohibits any platform from using this ebook in any manner for purposes of training artificial intelligence technologies to generate text. This includes, without limitation, technologies that are capable of generating works in the same style or genre as the Work. The Author reserves all rights to license uses of this ebook for generative AI training and development of machine learning language models.

No AI programs were used in the creation of this Work.

MAILING LIST

Join my mailing list and get a free spicy mafia romance novel, Married To My Mafia Boss.

You'll also be the first to hear the latest Cara news!

[Click here to join!](#)



Connect with Me!

Follow me on Amazon here: [Follow me](#)

Find me on Instagram - @carabianchiwrites

Find me on TikTok - @carabianchiwrites

ALSO BY CARA BIANCHI

Read all my books for FREE in Kindle Unlimited or buy on Amazon.

Join my mailing list [here](#) for a free forced marriage mafia romance novel!

You'll also get exclusive updates about upcoming books in the Angels & Brutes series!

Angels & Brutes

1 - [Ruined Beauty](#)

East Coast Bratva

1 - [Depraved Royals](#)

2 - [Twisted Sinner](#)

3 - [Vicious Hearts](#)

Novellas

[Saint Nikolai \(Christmas short\)](#)



For Mr. B

*From the first fiery flush to the final sweet breath,
The essence of beauty, so scornful of death.
In the space between heartbeats, me below, him above-
There's nothing that speaks to the soul more than love.*

CONTENTS

Trigger warnings

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)

[Chapter 44](#)

[Chapter 45](#)

[Chapter 46](#)

[Chapter 47](#)

[Chapter 48](#)

[Chapter 49](#)

[Chapter 50](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by Cara Bianchi](#)

[Mailing List](#)

[Russian and Italian Phrases](#)

[Russian Patronymics](#)

TRIGGER WARNINGS



I take your mental health seriously. The story is dark in places in terms of plot and does contain material that may be distressing to some readers.

Graphic sexual content: the book is a slow-ish burn but the spice is spicy when it hits. Expect hand necklaces, masturbation, praise kink, come play, spanking, anal sex, use of a sex toy, and tons of very dirty talk indeed

Genre-typical violence: people die on the page. It's not gratuitous, but it's there, and includes use of guns and knives

Alcohol use: on the page and frequent

Substance abuse: cocaine and heroin. Not depicted on the page but strong references made

Prostitution: not depicted but referred to frequently

Child sexual abuse & victimisation: in the context of a character's backstory. Not gratuitous or on the page

Mental health: panic attacks, PTSD, grief, depression

Abusive relationship dynamics: control, possessiveness, captivity, abduction, coercion (there are no dub- or non-con elements to the sexual side of the story)

Sexual violence/trafficking: references but nothing strong on the page

Pregnancy loss (implied): a brief scene which nonetheless may be triggering to some readers

Depiction of a character with dementia: this is not meant to represent all (or any) real people. It's fiction and does not reflect an accurate or universal experience of the condition.

Thanks for reading and proceed with caution if anything here might be difficult for you.

Of course, for many of us, trigger warnings are just a menu. In which case —*bon appétit*.



Josie

“‘**Y**ou’re getting fat as hell.”

I glance at Marc with a sigh. “What did you say?” I ask.

“You heard.” His eyes narrow into a critical glare. “That dress leaves nothing to the imagination, and let’s not kid ourselves. You haven’t exactly been hitting the gym since we landed in the US.”

“We’re supposed to be celebrating.” I seek refuge in the soft folds of my pashmina. “You didn’t attach any conditions when you proposed. Do I need to shed ten pounds before our wedding tomorrow? Because unless there’s a drive-thru liposuction clinic nearby—”

More like *twenty* pounds.” Marc counts out a stack of bills. “Spare me the sarcasm. I didn’t sign up for a participation trophy wife. If you plan to stand by my side, maintain your appearance.”

This man is the limit. He already made me remove my piercings, and we’re engaged in an ongoing discussion about the length of my hair, which he wants me to grow longer. My curvier figure is his latest source of discontent.

Merry Christmas to me.

Leaving New York marked my escape from my old life. At fourteen, I ventured into the world of selling my body. Some men were willing to part with a small fortune for a young, frightened girl. After a decade of degradation, I yearned for the freedom to be *anyone* but the person I’d become.

My journey with Marc kicked off in the summer. I met him in Toulouse during my European adventure, and he swept me off my feet with extravagant yacht trips and opulent dinners, culminating in a Tiffany engagement ring.

But love? Well, I soon discovered love doesn’t make it onto Marc’s radar. His affections extend only to himself. In exchange for a life of security and comfort, I endure his toxic attitude, and he remains ignorant of my troubled

past.

Tomorrow, we will be married in a Las Vegas wedding chapel. It's a far cry from my dream wedding, but it's what Marc desires. My wealthy investment banker fiancé is all about his own needs, and marrying me is mostly about pissing off his father. Daddy Bonneville doesn't want a curvy girl with tattoos for a daughter-in-law. I don't give off the right old-money, Ivy-League vibes.

My fiancé becomes increasingly insufferable each day, but I can't risk being pulled back into my former life. I'm damaged goods, and the world never lets me forget it. So, I opt for silence and a painted-on smile, all in exchange for the trappings of a privileged lifestyle. It's a charade of being someone I'm not, and it suits me just fine.

I *used* to want things. But I stopped dreaming long ago.

With Marc tapping his foot impatiently behind me, I seize the opportunity to irk him further. After all, didn't he just stress the importance of my appearance?

"Just fixing my makeup, honey," I say, meeting my own gaze in the mirror. "I want to make sure I don't let you down."

"Hurry up," he snaps.

Marc is never this demanding in bed. He's like a trigger-happy college kid but without the enthusiasm. How he can only last three thrusts yet seem so utterly bored is beyond me, but I must play along; my moans of ecstasy are unrealistic, but his precious ego matters more to him than my pleasure. Besides, I know he fucks around.

My husband-to-be has a thing for whores. It's more than ironic; somehow, I feel it's karma. It's not as though I *wanted* to be a call girl, but it doesn't change the fact that most of my clients were married to lonely women with empty lives. Just like me.

I'm putting my lip gloss wand back in the tube when Marc grabs my arm.

"Now," he says. "I'm done waiting. We're going to eat."



In the hotel restaurant, Marc and I look like every other affluent couple. You don't stay at the Venetian without the bankroll to match. The maître d' clucks and fusses around us, guiding us around the gigantic Christmas tree to our window table. En route, a figure briefly crosses my line of sight, vanishing through a side door in the blink of an eye.

My breath catches in my throat. He looked so much like...*no*. It wasn't him. *I'm losing my mind*.

Back in the spring, my best friend Morgana married Vlad Kislev, the man who is now the pakhan of New York City's most powerful bratva family. I worked at one of the family's businesses and spent a lot of time with Vlad's younger brother, Sasha.

Sweet *Jesus*, that man. I wanted him like no one else, and I gave him all the signs—the glances, the flirtatious smiles, the banter. But he was preoccupied with the shit that went down, and then he was at his brother's side, taking care of legal and criminal business. Soon, he had no time for me anymore.

I didn't believe I could be any more broken than I already was, but when Sasha distanced himself from me, I understood what I'd done. I'd let myself believe a bratva man could love me. After all, it happened to Morgana. But when Vlad saved her, her rough life hadn't yet corroded her soul. Not like mine had.

Sasha knew there were things left unsaid between us, and all the time I waited at the airport gate, I hoped he'd run in and stop me, just like in the movies. But he didn't, and I took my broken heart with me, cursing his name and my foolishness.

I thought I'd left those childish notions behind long ago. Yet, like an idiot, I yearned for something that wasn't real.

Sasha Kislev is a playboy, a man who revels in the company of many women, not just one. He would never let a single girl lay claim to his heart. I wanted him too much, and if he had stayed, he would have gleefully torn my heart to shreds.

When I was away from him and could clear my head, I understood I'd dodged a bullet. I don't need a man who makes my heart skip a beat with the slightest of smiles.

No such concerns with Marc. Keeping my feelings for him in check is easy—I don't have any, except for a kind of weary contempt. But I know how to keep a man happy. I spent years honing those skills. And yes, I'm marrying for money and security, but what's wrong with that?

I just want to be safe. If I have to endure one man's cruelty instead of many, isn't that a step up?



Sasha

Back in the day, they used to call Boris ‘The Shark.’ He likes to think it’s because he was a dangerous man, but I know it had more to do with his snaggle-toothed leer and that perpetual bad breath.

Vlad sent him out here to manage our first casino, but it wasn’t performing as well as we’d hoped. My adopted brother, Arman, serves as our information specialist, and it didn’t take him long to uncover Boris’s little scheme. Someone snitched and provided evidence he’d embezzled over a million dollars, but he denied it when confronted.

He won’t be pleased to see me. Everyone knows I’m the one who drops by when you’re in deep shit.

It’s not just about the money; it’s the audacity of it all. A million dollars might be chump change, but when the man we entrusted with our first foray into the gambling business double-crosses us, it calls for a strong response. There won’t be any second chances.

Boris knows all this. I don’t have to tell him he’s fucked. His people are really *our* people, and the friends he thought he had are guarding the door to this room to keep him in, not to keep *me* out.

I knock back my vodka. “Here’s the thing, Boris,” I begin, my tone measured. “You told Vlad—my brother and your boss—that our informant was a liar. You claimed it was a shame we even entertained the notion.”

Boris nods. It’s all he can do. His hands are taped to the chair’s arms, rendering him powerless. “*Da*, Alexandr Sergeyovich Kislev,” he mumbles. “I’d never do this to you. Let me talk to Vlad, and we can resolve this.”

I sigh, disappointment seeping into my voice. “You’ve just signed your own death warrant. I came here to give you a chance to present your side of the story, but you’ve insulted me with your bullshit.” I lean in closer, my eyes locking onto his. “We’ve seen the financial records and the wire transfer receipts. Planning a quick getaway to the Cayman Islands, were you?”

Boris's pupils dilate, his body grappling with stress. "It's a setup," he stammers.

I wrinkle my nose in disdain. "Then how did you purchase that lavish new home of yours? We laundered all that money for you, yet you paid in cash. It wasn't the law that concerned you, was it?"

Boris is about to crack. He curls his fingers to relieve the tension, but it's too much.

"Tell me the truth, Boris. This is the only time I'll listen to you. Then nothing you say will change anything."

Boris swallows hard. "Okay, it's true," he blurts. "I got paranoid. The Toscas were causing problems back home, and I stole what I could, planning to bail before things got hairy."

Shit. Our Italian rivals have indeed been agitating, but I didn't think they were any real challenge to our authority.

"That's gonna change real soon, Boris. We came to an agreement with them just yesterday. So you're gonna die over a misunderstanding. How fucking mundane is that?"

I roll up my sleeves. Boris is begging, gibbering as his words crash into one another, but I'm not listening.

"You just stay here and think about what's coming to you," I say. "I'm gonna get another drink."



I leave the private lounge and return to the restaurant. The bartender knows my preferences and delivers my vodka with a nod. I take a sip.

Fuck the season of goodwill. Boris's lies have put me in a bad mood, and I'm more than ready to despatch him and bring this shitty business to a close.

When I turn around, what I see almost floors me.

Josie.

There's no mistaking her. She could change everything about her appearance, and I'd still instantly recognize her. That heart-shaped face, those bright eyes. Her raven hair is shorter than I remember, and her figure is a little fuller, but she's more beautiful than ever.

As I watch, her gorgeous features twist into a pained expression. It's then I notice the man sitting opposite her.

Ah yes. So *this* is the fucker. Marc Bonneville, French financial wiz kid and the bastard who is marrying the girl of my dreams. He's jabbing an accusatory finger at her as he speaks, little flecks of spittle flying. Whatever he's saying, it's not the sweet nothings of a man in love.

A few months ago, Josie needed a job, and my brother Vlad hired her at Kislev Enterprises to launder money under my watch. She excelled at it and needed little oversight, but I'd wanted to be close to her. Something about her set me ablaze. But circumstances intervened, and I put her on ice for a while, determined to conquer her when I had time to give her my full attention. I presumed she'd always be there, waiting for me. So I was pissed when she left on her travels.

Josie had gotten away from me, and that was that. I hate that she got to me so much, even though I never sealed the deal with her; she occupied my thoughts constantly.

I found out the other day that Josie was engaged. My sister-in-law Morgana is her best friend and Vlad's wife, so she got the phone call. While I was still reeling, Vlad approached me with an offer, and I accepted in the interest of the *bratva*.

I knew I had to let Josie go. But she and Marc were coming home to visit, which was the whole fucking reason I decided to hot-foot it out of town.

I thought I couldn't trust myself not to act out when I saw her with some other guy. And now that I see her quietly crying as the man who's supposed to love her berates her in public, I realize I was absolutely right.

She mutters something to Marc, her eyes flashing with defiance. He responds by twisting her wrist, drawing a small cry of anguish from her.

Boris could have stolen the shirt off my back and fucked my mother, and I wouldn't be consumed with as much white-hot fury as I am now. Marc stands and walks past me, and I silently fall into step a few feet behind him.

Wherever that cunt is going, I'm going too.

Marc Bonneville walks with the unearned swagger of the nepo baby. He works for his father's hedge fund and probably hasn't even seen a resumé in his life, let alone needed one. Admittedly, I'm not that different, but I've had to earn my position through hard work.

This entitled prick thinks he's untouchable, but he's about to find out otherwise.

Marc takes a pack of slim panatellas from his jacket pocket and puts one between his lips. He lights it in the lobby before passing through the door onto the street. He swings a left and tucks himself down an alleyway, taking out his cell and pressing a couple of buttons as he draws on the cigar.

"Hey, Sandy," he says into the phone. "I know, baby. I'll be back next week, and I want you to keep Thursday just for me. Shave your pussy smooth."

He fucking *cheats*? On *Josie*, of all people?

The revelation sends a surge of rage through me, and my arm moves on its own, slapping the phone out of Marc's hand with a resounding crack.

"What are you—"

I seize the cigar and brandish it, burning a searing mark of agony onto his face. He bellows in pain and attempts to flee, but I grasp his hair and slam his head against the wall. He crumples to the ground, clutching his singed cheek.

"Do you know who I am?" he cries. "Who my *father* is?"

I frown. "No. Why? Didn't your mother tell you?"

"I have money," he splutters as I haul him to his feet. "What do you want? I have a ton of cash in my pocket. Take it."

"Marc, I'm a billionaire." I punch him in the stomach, and he vomits at my feet. "And your money would be just as worthless if I wasn't. This is not

about me. It's about *her*."



Josie

It's not the first time Marc has grabbed me. He thinks a finger to the chest or a shove emphasizes his point, and I suppose he's right. It sure as hell gets my attention. I flex my slightly swollen wrist, a dull throb of pain coursing through the joint.

The fight came to a head over gnocchi. I love it, and when Marc and I first met, we went to so many Italian restaurants. He delighted in making me happy back then, but I was just dazzled and couldn't see what was right in front of my eyes.

We were planning on ordering the international taster menu tonight, meaning the Mediterranean course would have been less than you'd serve a toddler, but you'd think I'd asked to visit the all-you-can-eat buffet. He ranted about my lack of discipline, saying I couldn't possibly respect him if I didn't commit to getting down to a size zero.

I shouldn't have sassed him, I know. But my thoughts were miles away, and seeing the Sasha lookalike set me off. Marc knows when I'm not really listening, and if there's one thing he can't stand, it's being ignored.

I'm wiping my face with a napkin when I hear someone sitting opposite me. I catch the scent of Marc's disgusting cigars and draw a deep breath, waiting for the admonishments to begin again.

"Hey, *zlotse*."

I pull the napkin away from my face. Sasha smiles at me.

What the *fuck* is he doing here?

"Is your wrist sore?" He reaches into the ice bucket and dumps a handful of ice into his napkin, bundling it up. He turns my hand in his, watching the bones move under my skin. "I think it'll be alright. Here." He presses the makeshift cold compress against my skin, holding it in place.

I'm staring. My mascara is all over my face, and I just know I'm red-eyed and blotchy. Why did I run into Sasha *now*?

The bastard looks gorgeous, obviously. His short hair at the sides contrasts with the longer, tousled hair on top, pulled back into a messy knot. Neatly groomed stubble accentuates his chiseled cheekbones, and his gray-blue eyes twinkle in the dim light. Dressed in a navy three-piece suit, he looks remarkably refined, and his tattoos peeking out from beneath his shirt only add to his allure. He must be here for some official business.

“I—hi.” I sit up straight. “This is weird. I saw you earlier, but I figured I was hallucinating.”

Sasha lets go of my hand and leans back, gesturing at himself. “I’m all too real, baby. And I saw your fiancé do something a real man *never* does.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Men who hurt women are cowards, Josie. Cowards and weaklings. What set him off?”

“He was pissed off at me for wanting to order gnocchi. Started telling me I needed to lose weight. I said that me being smaller might make his dick look bigger, but he’d still be hung like a Vienna sausage.”

“The tiny ones in a can?” Sasha asks. “That’s my girl.” His eyes hold mine, and a shiver of pleasure shoots down my spine as he speaks again. “You really wanna marry that piece of shit?”

“No.”

I don’t know why I’m telling him the truth. It’s the way he smiles. He makes me feel like the only woman in the world. I guess that’s how he gets so many girls falling over themselves for him.

“Hmmm.” Sasha catches a server’s eye, and he scuttles over. “A bottle of Zubrowska, two glasses, and a fresh ice bucket.” He reaches into his pocket and extracts a wad of bills, handing two hundreds. “Get yourself something, kid. And tell Dmitri to come over.”

The money is held together with an ornate gold clip, a cobra’s head with red rubies for eyes. When Marc bought it, I laughed, saying it made him look like a wannabe mobster. Unsurprisingly, it suits Sasha much better.

“So, you say you don’t want to marry Marc,” Sasha says. “In that case, I have to wonder—why did you accept his proposal?”

“Why do *you* have Marc’s money clip?” I counter, dodging his question.

“I had a little chat with him. He emptied his pockets without even being asked. Pathetic, really. I took the clip but gave him his money back out of principle. Compared to me, he’s a pauper.”

I swallow. “So where is he now?”

We’re interrupted by a tall man with a scar on his shoulder. “You asked for me, Sasha?”

“*Da*, Dmitri.” Sasha hands the man a set of car keys. “Dispose of this as soon as possible. Some cargo also needs handling, so I’d appreciate it if you’d get someone on that, too.”

“Of course. And Boris?”

Sasha laughs. “I’d forgotten about him. Let one of the new kids kill him. They need blood on their hands eventually, and I’m busy.”

Dmitri leaves, and the server brings the drinks. Sasha pours me a generous measure.

“So,” I ask again, “where is Marc now?”

“I scared him away.” Sasha takes a good slug of vodka. “He’ll be giving you plenty of space for the rest of the evening.”

I throw back my drink, and it burns all the way down. “You asshole,” I say. “He’ll be furious when he catches up with me. Marc is not the kind of man to forgive easily.”

Sasha arches an eyebrow. “Neither am I. So enjoy your freedom, and let’s live it up. I’ve nothing better to do than entertain a beautiful woman for the evening.”

“Where?” I say, looking over my shoulder.

He grins. “Obviously, I meant you. You may not be pleased to see me, but you’re stuck with me now. Have some fun on my dime while you can. It’s

Christmas, and I feel like being generous.”

I open my mouth to protest, but the words die on my lips. I’d be lying if I said I was desperate to reconnect with an angry and humiliated Marc.

I pour another measure and down it. As the alcohol begins to take effect, blurring the edges of my worries, a daring voice inside me speaks up.

Why not spend a night on the town with a dangerously charming bratva man? What’s the worst that could happen?

“Anyway,” Sasha says, grabbing the menu, “all this serendipity is making me hungry.”

Our server approaches eagerly, ready to take our orders, and Sasha addresses him with a charming smile. “I’ll have the T-bone steak, rare, with garlic butter,” he says. He winks at me. “And my beautiful companion will have a big-ass dish of gnocchi.”



Josie

I wake up in the extravagant suite Marc and I had booked at the Venetian, the remnants of last night's escapades playing havoc with my head. My temples throb painfully as I attempt to sit up, only to be met with a surge of nausea that sends me sinking back into the plush pillows. I hear the shower running in the bathroom, indicating that Marc is already up and about.

What a wild dream. I strain to recall the details, but they slip through my mind like water through my fingers. All I can remember is Sasha suddenly appearing out of nowhere, followed by a whirlwind of drinking and something about taking a dip in a fountain. And then, there was that limousine ride? Dreams have a way of vanishing into thin air as soon as you wake up, but one thing is crystal clear—I was definitely having a blast.

The bathroom door opens, and I close my eyes. The last thing I want is an argument or Marc's gross demands for sex.

To my surprise, I hear nothing, so I open one eye. Sasha stands before me, in the flesh, a towel wrapped around his waist.

Holy fuck.

Lust supersedes my initial shock. Tattoos literally everywhere but his face. His body is even sexier than I thought, and God knows I've imagined him naked more than a few times. Broad shoulders and a solid chest, his rippled abdomen below. I find myself hoping his towel will slip.

"Good morning," Sasha says, squeezing his hair with a second towel. "You have wonderful shampoo and conditioner, *zlotse*. And that shower gel smells fantastic, too—it's almond and honey or some shit like that? I usually use some designer manly stuff, but I never knew what I was missing. I feel like a whole new woman."

I sit up again, rubbing my eyes. "*I* feel like hell. I can't remember a thing, Sasha. What happened? Where is Marc?"

Sasha opens the closet and frowns. "None of this shit will fit me. That fiancé of yours was a real skinny fucker."

Did he say *was*?

“Sasha—”

“Let’s get the important stuff out of the way.” He turns to face me, counting his points on his fingers as he speaks. “You wanted to ice skate, and I said no because we’d probably both die trying. We lost seven million dollars on roulette but won nine. And you told a cop to suck your dick, which was fucking hilarious but cost me ten grand.” He runs his hand through his damp hair. “Oh yeah. And your abusive bastard of a fiancé is dead.”

I fight back the urge to throw up. *He’s lying*. How could he say something like that so casually?

“Tell me this is one of your unfunny jokes.”

Sasha shakes his head, and I drop my face into my hands.

The arrogant fucking prick. He waltzed into my life, treated it like his own personal playground, and for *what*?

“You asshole!” I cry. “What makes you think I want you to—”

“I don’t give a fuck *what* you think,” Sasha snaps. “If he were making you happy, *zlotse*, I’d have said hello and moved on. But the second he grabbed your wrist, he was dead.”

The venom in his voice surprises me. Marc thought he was a badass, but Sasha is on a whole other level, and despite myself, I can’t help but feel a surge of savage satisfaction at his words. He might be shallow in many ways, but no one has ever defended me like this in my entire life. I’m sure he was keen on killing Marc anyway, but still, it feels pretty good.

“I was doing okay here,” I say. “Marc wasn’t a great guy, but marrying him guaranteed me a life away from...you know.” I look away. “I don’t wanna go back to *that*.”

“Why not get a job?” Sasha asks.

“It’s not that simple,” I snap. “I lack work experience and references, and people always figure me out. Predators come out of the woodwork. The only real job I had was—”

“At Kislev Enterprises,” Sasha finishes. “So what’s stopping you from returning to work for me?”

“I aspire to better than being a glorified secretary for your family’s shady business,” I sigh, sinking back onto the pillows. “Sasha, you’re insane. Marc may have been a bastard, but people will notice he’s gone. He’s not some criminal lowlife!”

“He’s not anything now.” Sasha folds his arms. “And criminal I may be, but I’m not a lowlife.”

“You took me to bed when I was intoxicated! What kind of man would—“

“No.” Sasha cuts me off with a glare so cold I feel it in my bones. “How dare you accuse me of that. I never touched you. You were way, way drunker than me, and I wasn’t gonna go there.” He chuckles. “Believe me, *zlotse*. You’d remember if I’d been inside you. You’d feel me for days.”

I glance down to avoid his lascivious smirk and notice I’m wearing my satin slip nightdress. I must have put it on at some point, and I wonder whether I tried to seduce him. If I did, he’s being gracious enough not to mention it.

“Goddammit, Sasha. You have your entire life to be a jerk. You couldn’t have taken a day off?” His shrug is all the answer I need, and I slump back onto the pillows. “So what now? You’ve murdered my fiancé, and while I can’t claim to be heartbroken, I don’t know what to do next. I have hardly any money of my own. Marc refused to let me have any.”

Sasha rolls his eyes and picks up his clothes from the back of the sofa. I assume he slept beside me in his underwear, but I dare not ask. He goes back into the bathroom, leaving the door open.

“What were your original plans for today?” he asks.

“To get married here in Vegas. Then we were returning to New York for Christmas to surprise everyone and throw a reception. Marc didn’t want a big fancy wedding. Said it was a waste of money.”

“Cheap cunt.”

Sasha appears in the doorway. He has his pants and shirt on, but he's chosen to forgo the vest. He rolls up his sleeves, and my mouth goes dry.

"My G5 is waiting at the airport," Sasha says matter-of-factly. "Since the whole marriage thing is off the table, I suggest we grab breakfast and whatever else might prevent you from hurling all over the upholstery." He gestures for me to get up. "Come on, let's go. I'll be waiting for you in the lobby."



I dress hurriedly, tossing my clothes and possessions into my suitcase. When I get downstairs, I spot Sasha immediately, walking away from the concierge desk.

"You look wonderful," he says. He takes my heavy bag as though it weighs nothing.

I shake my head, trying to clear it. "This is so wrong, Sasha. I don't know why I let caution slip away last night, but reality will catch up with me eventually. Marc's death won't go unnoticed."

Sasha points at the large-screen TV above the lounge seating. The rolling news ticker mentions Marc's name, and I step closer to listen.

"European finance tycoon Marc Bonneville was found dead this morning in what police have confirmed was a suicide," the newscaster says. "His car was discovered off-road in an undisclosed area of the Nevada desert. It has been speculated that Bonneville had lost a large sum in the casinos—a source told us he was found with receipts for several well-known gambling dens. Investigators are not looking for anyone else in connection to the death."

Sasha puts a hand on my shoulder. "Marc had money, but I have more. And I have my name, which tends to motivate people. My reputation precedes me, and I do not fuck around. When I want something, I get it, and when I *don't* want something—or *someone*—they're gone." He smiles and nods at the TV. "He's not your problem anymore."



I spend most of the flight to New York asleep on the G5's reclining seats. Even Marc didn't have his own plane, and although first class is impressive, there's something about a private jet that screams obscene wealth. It certainly helps to have access to the bathroom whenever I want, but the bubbly sickness has mostly subsided by landing.

When we leave the airport, Sasha heads for the long-stay parking garage. It's far colder than it was in Vegas, and the wind whips my hair as I hurry after him.

"You left your car?"

"Like I said, it was a business trip," Sasha replies. He shucks off his jacket and throws it over my shoulders. "I didn't know how long I'd be. But I called ahead and told Vlad I was on my way."

"Thank you." I pull the jacket around me, enjoying Sasha's warmth. "Does he know I'm with you?"

"No." Sasha's tone is brusque. "I thought I'd make it a surprise. And I have to talk to Vlad when we get back, so it'd be best if you went with Morgana and found something to do."

He's barely said a word since we landed. Even on the plane, he was quiet. There's something on his mind, but he's closed up tight.

Sasha collects his key and then throws his suitcase into the trunk. "Get in. We gotta get moving."

"What's the matter?" I ask as I get into the passenger seat.

He ignores my question. "How's your memory doing?" He starts the engine. "Anything flooding back yet?"

"It's barely a trickle. I'm sure we stole a helicopter?"

He laughs. "No, I hired it. You insisted I was lying, though. Anything else?"

“Some bullshit about controlling the fountains at the Bellagio with a special button. You honestly thought I’d fall for that?”

Sasha shoots me a scathing look. “Josie. That cost me two hundred and fifty thousand. Only for you to choose James fucking Blunt as the soundtrack to your festive custom water show.”

I clap my hand over my mouth, mortified. “You’re kidding. Why did you do all those things? You could have said no!”

“To you?” Sasha shakes his head as he pulls out onto the highway. “Not if I can help it.”



Sasha

The house is quiet when we arrive, thankfully. I need to tuck Josie away and appraise Vlad of the monumental fuck-up I've committed. I know he will be furious, but he won't be the only one, and I can only face one reckoning at a time.

I can't just blame this on being drunk. It's partly true, but those who know me well are aware that I'm impulsive even when stone-cold sober. Last night, I was acutely aware of my actions, even if Josie wasn't. It's just another glaring reminder that money can buy about anything.

We reach the door, and I stop and turn to her. "Listen," I say. "Things are gonna get awkward real fast in there."

"Why? You leave the gas on or something?"

"It's a bit more serious than that." I put my key in the lock. "I may have made certain promises to people that I won't be able to keep. This is gonna stir up a real hornet's nest, and I'm not sure how bad it'll get. Just consider yourself forewarned."

"This has nothing to do with me!"

"Well, actually—"

I push open the door.

"Surprise!"

The room is packed with people. A confetti bomb fires a plume of tiny foil squares into the air, and a massive banner proudly stretches across the room, proclaiming, 'Congratulations to Sasha and Claudia.'

Oh *fuck*.

The cheers and applause die down fast. I scan the crowd, my eyes locking onto Vlad's knowing gaze. He's already figured it out. None of the guests know me as well as he does, so they exchange baffled glances.

I spot Sal Tosca, Claudia's father and the Don of a prominent Italian mafia family. Until ten seconds ago, he was under the impression I would marry his daughter.

Because that's exactly what I promised.

Morgana appears through the crowd, cradling her belly. She's well into her third trimester and glowing, but her eyes are wild right now. She snatches Josie's hand and leads her into the back lounge, closing the door.

Vlad claps his hands, making everyone jump. "Get the music going," he says. "I'll get more booze."

A speaker crackles to life somewhere, and the party resumes, but the air is thick with tension. Sal Tosca, with fire in his eyes, is making a beeline straight for me, but Arman intercepts him. I hear Vlad's voice behind me.

"Wine cellar, *brat*. Now."



"What the fuck do you mean, you got married?" Vlad says. "And to Josie? She was meant to have a wedding, but not to you."

It seemed like a brilliant idea at the time. All it took was some clever maneuvering to get Josie to the chapel, and once I'd greased the officiant's palm, there was no turning back. She was going to marry me, whether she liked it or not. And she most certainly didn't like it.

I tried to ignore her quiet sobs beside me as I gripped her wrist with an iron resolve. My mind was consumed by the thought of her standing at the altar with that scumbag Bonneville, and I swore I'd never let any other man near my Josie again.

Before I left for Vegas, I had been wallowing in self-pity, haunted by the dreadful news of Josie's impending marriage. That's when Vlad informed me that Sal Tosca wanted to offer his daughter to me. It wasn't a surprise—Claudia Tosca and I had a brief fling, and she didn't want it to end. I didn't want to be tied down, especially not to some clingy girl who mistook a few dates for true love. I was so spooked by her that I didn't even take her to bed,

which was unprecedented.

But with Josie gone and no reason to decline, I reluctantly agreed to the arrangement. It was supposed to ease tensions and appease the family, after all.

I fiddle with a corkscrew as I explain. “I didn’t exactly plan it. But her scumbag of a fiancé hurt her right in front of me, and I...reacted.”

“By which you mean he’s dead.” Vlad massages his temples with his fingertips. “I knew you only agreed to marry Claudia because you’d missed your chance with Josie. I didn’t expect you to be so stupid as to formally accept the match only to fucking take another wife first.” He throws his hands in the air. “I mean, what the fuck do you want from me, Sasha? I can’t make this go away. Tosca will be livid, and with good reason.”

“You married a civilian,” I say. “That’s what pissed off our rivals and allies. The richest plum we had to offer was you, and you gave yourself to Morgana. I’m not saying you were wrong, but it’s no wonder other mob families feel slighted.”

“Oh, right.” Vlad folds his arms and leans against the wall. “And I’m sure your impulsive Vegas wedding to a drunk girl, after you agreed to wed a mafia princess and ease tensions, will do wonders to improve matters. Thanks.”

“Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit, you know.”

“I swear I’m gonna break your fucking jaw any second.” Vlad glares at me and sighs. “You are going to apologize like a whipped dog, and I’ll arrange to have your marriage annulled.”

I don’t know why I married Josie. But there’s no way I’m backing down now, not when I have the perfect excuse to keep her.

“Vladi, I’ll say this once, and I don’t care if it earns me a punch,” I declare firmly. “Josie was miserable. Her fiancé was an abusive monster, and if I hadn’t intervened, she would have condemned herself to a life of misery. You understand that, right?”

Vlad is still seething, but his expression softens slightly. I know damn well he can relate; he reacted in much the same way when his own beloved wife was in trouble.

“So what’s the plan?” he asks wearily. “Tell me you have one.”

“I can’t let her go. Divorced, annulled, it’d make no difference. Tosca would have her killed just to satisfy the insult. As my wife, she’s entitled to our protection.”

“What does Josie think about all this?” Vlad asks, pulling a bottle of Côte du Rhone from the rack. “I can’t believe she agreed to it.”

“She doesn’t remember.”

Vlad wheels around. “What the hell do you mean?”

“When I say she was drunk, I mean blackout drunk,” I say. “She knows I killed Bonneville, but she doesn’t remember that we went to the twenty-four-hour chapel and moved the wedding up. She was supposed to marry Bonneville there at noon today, but she ended up marrying me instead at around three-thirty in the morning.” I smile. “She won’t be happy, but I’m ecstatic about it.”

Vlad thrusts three bottles of wine into my hands. “You fucking *idiot*,” he says. “I was worried about Tosca’s reaction, but wait until Josie realizes what you’ve done. I don’t know who I’d rather take on.”



Josie

Morgana quickly clears the people out of the kitchen—a pregnant woman is a force of nature, and no one argues with her. Now we’re sitting in the breakfast nook as I try to understand what’s happening.

“Sasha’s engaged?” My voice trembles as Morgana hands me a glass of water, but my hand shakes so much that I have to set it down. “What the hell?”

“A mafia family demanded a display of good faith from the Kislevs,” Morgana explains calmly. “Vladi was expected to marry a mob princess, and most of our rivals and associates accepted it gracefully when he married me instead. But the Toscas didn’t take it so well. When Sal Tosca wanted Sasha for his daughter, Vlad floated the idea, and to everyone’s surprise, Sasha agreed.”

Wow. The eternal playboy, ready to settle down? And here I was, foolishly believing he might be getting all protective of me because he had unresolved feelings. Maybe he’s just toying with me while he still can.

“I couldn’t have imagined Sasha ever getting married,” I remark, sipping my water. “He did that just for the family?”

“He said it was to prevent the bratva from going to war over something so trivial,” Morgana replies with a sigh. “Vladi believes that Sal Tosca was just looking for an excuse to pick a fight. He disapproves of Vladi’s management style.”

Figures. Vladi may not be one to trifle with, but he’s far less volatile than his late father, Sergey. On the other hand, Sasha seems to have inherited that impulsivity and embraced it with gusto. It makes him a formidable enforcer; he doesn’t hesitate to do what needs to be done.

Just as I’m about to inquire further about Claudia Tosca, the man himself, Sasha, enters the kitchen. Our eyes lock momentarily, and Morgana takes her cue, heading for the door.

“I’m leaving,” she announces, poking Sasha in the chest with her finger, “so you can explain yourself. I don’t know what you’re going to say, but it better be good.”

“Believe me,” Sasha mutters, “it isn’t. If you think you’re pissed at me now, go find Vlad. He has the full story.”

Morgana glares at him before casting a fleeting smile in my direction. Then she’s gone.

Sasha has freed his hair from its topknot, and he runs his fingers through it, sweeping it back from his face. My anger boils beneath the surface, and I’m frustrated by how infuriatingly attractive I find him, even now.

He takes his phone from his pocket and swipes at the screen.

“Hello?” I say. “What could be so important that you can’t give me your attention right now? You murder my fiancé and get me blind drunk, then walk me hand-in-hand into your fucking surprise engagement party? I sure as hell would remember if you’d mentioned that!”

Sasha says nothing. He holds up his phone, showing me something on the screen. “Here, *zlotse*. Keep swiping right.”

I take the phone, and for a moment, I don’t understand what I’m looking at.

It’s a picture of me, dressed in the same outfit I wore last night and wearing a veil as if it’s my bachelorette party. I’m standing beside a mock Grecian plinth, and atop it is a shoddy alabaster statue of Cupid. I’m playfully pointing at the cherub’s tiny bare ass and laughing.

“The fuck is this?” I ask, glancing at Sasha. He averts his eyes, and I scroll to the next photo.

Sasha and I, holding champagne glasses. We’re outside, and a pinkish cast of light suggests a neon sign just out of shot, the blur of highway headlamps in the background. I’m laughing as I throw pieces of torn paper into the air.

Suddenly, a rush of memory floods my mind. We were in a limousine, but where were we heading? Somewhere I had been before. I kept saying that we were in serious trouble, and Sasha just laughed it off, claiming it was all a

joke. Nothing to worry about. And then I wanted to tear up some paperwork for... Wait.

I swipe my thumb again to reveal another picture. In this one, we stand in front of an enormous neon heart adorned with flowers, but the happiness has faded from my eyes. They look red and puffy, and my smile is long gone. A man in a Hawaiian shirt grins between us, and the pegboard at our feet boldly states, 'WE GOT HITCHED!'

No. It's a joke.

My eyes lift to meet Sasha's gaze, and he hisses through his teeth. "Yep," he says, his voice tinged with resignation. "You're my wife. You and I are Mr. and Mrs. Idiot Cliché, and I'm in serious fucking trouble."

With that, the memories come rushing back.

We had gone to the chapel to cancel the ceremony, and I made a show of dramatically tearing up the forms Marc and I had painstakingly filled out just hours earlier. Sasha took pictures of me goofing around, and I laughed. But then the officiant said it was time, and Sasha had handed over a thick wad of bills. I protested, but he grabbed my wrist, held me by his side, and...the rest is a hazy blur.

I'm married to Sasha Kislev. The man got me inebriated and—

"You mean to tell me you wouldn't try to sleep with me because I was too drunk, but you had no issue forcing me to marry you?"

Sasha shrugs. "I'm not a perfect gentleman, Josie. Just close."

I hurl his phone at his head, and he ducks. The phone smashes into the kitchen door and bounces to the ground.

"You fucking asshole!" I scream. "Why did you do that? You can't do whatever the hell you want! I'm not yours to—"

"Oh yes, you are." Sasha's tone is low and even, but the edge is enough to silence me. "I let you slip away from me once, and I was a damn fool to do it. Forcing you into this marriage was an impulsive decision, but now it's done. Without my protection, you'd be a sitting duck, likely to be slaughtered by

the Toscas or anyone seeking to gain favor with them. So whether you like it or not, you belong to me, and you'd better get used to the idea. Your life depends on it."

I don't know which of us moved, but suddenly, we're standing just a foot apart. I hold his stormy eyes with mine, refusing to back down.

"I *hate* you for this," I whisper. "All it took was one glance across a crowded restaurant, and you crashed into my life and ruined it."

"You would have been miserable with Marc," Sasha takes a small step closer. "I won't hurt you."

"But I won't be safe," I murmur, my voice quivering. "I'm a bratva wife. *Your* wife. And you bring trouble wherever you go, don't you?"

Sasha tightens his jaw, moving toward me until our bodies nearly touch. He takes hold of my chin, his thumb resting against my lower lip.

"Look at me," he commands.

I haven't taken my eyes off him throughout this entire exchange, and he knows it. I should stop him, resist his control, but I feel weak, as though he's moving me like a puppet.

"You don't have to like me, *zlotse*," he continues, his voice a deep rumble. "If it makes things easier, hate me. To be honest, your anger? It turns me the fuck on. But understand this—I *am* trouble. I'll give you all the trouble you can handle and then some."

His body presses against mine, his free hand firmly gripping the counter, effectively trapping me in place. "You're crazy," I say.

"You bet. But I won't let anything happen to you, Josie. I promise."

We breathe each other's breath for a beat or two, and I close my eyes, trying to block him out. He releases me and moves away.

"I gotta go deal with this, and it's not gonna be pretty," he says. "Stay out of sight."



Sasha

The party has moved up to the roof terrace. I make my way up the stairs, ready to meet the consequences of my actions.

I've never been adept at handling the aftermath when I'm responsible for the mayhem. I'm far more accustomed to cleaning up other people's messes or simply walking away from the chaos I create. This time, however, it's not a minor blunder. I've royally screwed up. Even worse, I have little to offer in reparation because there's no way I'm letting go of Josie.

She's my wife. My damn *wife*. Just the mere thought of it gets my blood pumping. It's something I could never have foreseen, yet here we are. The woman who hijacked my thoughts from the moment we met now bears my name. She's mine, and anyone foolish enough to challenge that fact is either incredibly naive or dangerously suicidal.

Sure, she's pissed at me. But I can read between the lines and feel the electric charge in the air when I get near. I'm no stranger to the art of making women ache for me, and she'll be no exception, regardless of how hard she tries to push me away. But if I'm going to throw the entire underworld into chaos to keep her safe, we will play this husband and wife game for real.

My younger sister, Lilyana, spots me and thrusts a beer into my hand. "Vladi is in conference with Sal Tosca and some of the *komissiya* members," she says. "You've really outdone yourself this time, Sasha. The man is baying for your blood."

Damn it. I'd convinced myself I could smooth things over with some slick talking, but the way things are shaping up is not promising. I chug the drink and hand the bottle back to Lilyana.

"Don't go over there, Sasha. You don't know what—"

I'm halfway there when Claudia Tosca charges at me.

"I can't believe you did this, you bastard!" She raises her hand, and I decide to let her have this one. I've embarrassed her, albeit unintentionally, and her fury is understandable. The slap lands, and she curls her fingers, scraping my

skin with her nails.

“That’s enough, Claudia,” I say. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

“Oh, sure,” she sneers. “Sasha Kislev, the man who’s everyone’s and no one’s. You said the right things when we were dating, and then you were all, ‘Sorry, honey, I don’t think we’re a good match.’ Then you agree to marry me, and now,” her eyes flash with renewed fury, “I find out you went to Vegas and married some slut instead?”

I feel sorry for her, but insults directed at Josie won’t fly. Before I can issue a rebuke, Sal Tosca appears at her side.

“Go away, Claudia,” he says. “You’re making a fool of yourself.”

Claudia stalks away, casting me a murderous look as she departs. Tosca turns back to me, his expression grim.

“You’re an idiot, Sasha,” he says, “Do you understand what you’ve done?”

“I’m getting the idea.”

“Let me enlighten you.” He gestures behind him. “Your brother and these honorable men think you’re a fucking loose cannon. You know what loose cannons do, boy?”

It seems unwise to be a smartass now. I shake my head.

“They sink ships.” Tosca raises an eyebrow. “And your ship is going all the way to the bottom, taking all you jumped-up Russian fucks with it unless I see some cooperation.”

I see where this is going. I glance at Vladi, and he shrugs. Whatever Tosca has demanded has already been granted, but Vlad would never let Josie’s life hang in the balance. So, what the hell does he want?

Tosca sees my unease and rises to his theme, puffing out his chest as he speaks. “Until you fulfill my conditions, our families will not recognize each other as allies. And if you refuse to make amends, we *will* go to war. That’s what my daughter’s honor means to me.”

The deceitful prick. He couldn't care less about her so-called honor—he just wants that high-strung lady off his hands. She's too tightly wound to make a good bratva wife, and he probably thought her devotion to me would keep her in check.

Well, I say screw that. Claudia Tosca is not the right fit for me, and I should never have agreed to this doomed union in the first place.

“I won't marry her, Sal,” I state firmly. “Whatever else you want from me, I'll consider.”

Tosca turns back to the *komissiya* and Vlad. “I'm calling it,” he announces. “Sasha Kislev now owes *me* a personal debt of honor. This is a private agreement and can be invoked at any time.” He turns to me. “Tell them you agree.”

Fuck it. What's the worst that could happen? I don't want the whole bratva going to war on my account, and whatever Tosca wants can hardly be worse than the stuff I do every day.

“Sure.” I extend my hand. “Let's shake on it.”

Tosca smiles. “I'll shake your hand when it's done, boy. I'll be in touch.”

He walks toward the bar and begins remonstrating with the still-furious Claudia. The *komissiya* men disperse, and Vlad appears at my side.

“Any idea what he wants me to do?” I ask.

“No clue.” Vlad claps me on the back. “But I wouldn't worry about it. Sal is full of shit—his *famiglia* isn't as powerful as he likes to make out, and if he went to war with us, he'd lose. We have a lot of people we can call on if needed.”

“So I could have told him to fuck himself?”

Vlad shoots me a glance. “No. You insulted him, and that demands satisfaction. The *komissiya* aren't fucking pleased, but if Tosca is happy, they'll let it go. You owe him, that's all.” He shucks off his jacket and drapes it over the back of a chair. “But it's been a while since an honor debt has been issued against a Kislev, so thanks for that. You've made us look like a

bunch of clowns.”

I’m growing weary of this conversation. “Do you happen to know where Josie is?” I ask.

“Before Morgana went to bed, she mentioned setting Josie up in your suite. There’s no other available space.” Vlad raises an eyebrow. “So either your dubious charm will work its magic, or you’ll be getting acquainted with the couch.”

Our family’s mansion is massive, but Josie has spent enough time here to know her way around. “I’ll go find her,” I say. “A lot has happened in the last twenty-four hours, and she’s understandably unimpressed. For all I know, she’s booby-trapping the suite as we speak.”

Vlad grins. “Another party we’ve managed to ruin, but at least it wasn’t my fault this time.” He gives me a shove. “Go on, *bratan*. It’s technically your wedding night. Let’s see if you survive it.”



Josie

Morgana offered to stay with me, but I declined. She looked exhausted, and I didn't want her to castrate Sasha with her bare hands when she found out what he'd done to me. My presence here is enough of a problem as it is.

Sasha's suite is cold, sterile, and minimalist. Everything I hate in interior design. The bathroom is okay but too bright and sparse, and there's no bathtub.

I shower quickly and throw on an ankle-length satin kimono, piling my hair on my head and securing it with pins.

What am I gonna do? I'm so screwed. All I wanted was a dull, safe life where I didn't have to think about my past. Now I'm married to Sasha fucking Kislev. Just *associating* with him could get me killed, let alone being his wife.

I've lived in fear my whole life, just like my mom before me. Always waiting for a man to make demands, steal, hurt, or take. Never daring to believe I belong to myself. There's always some asshole waiting to stake his claim.

Sasha is just another user. It's my lot in life to be treated like an ornament at best and a piece of ass at worst. No one would ever put a woman as ruined as me on a pedestal.

I hear the suite door opening.

"Josie?"

I come out of the ensuite to see Sasha standing in the bedroom as though he has every right to be there.

"What are you doing in here?" I ask. "You didn't even knock."

"This is *my* room." His expression makes me want to kick those straight white teeth down his throat. "Why would I knock? We're married."

I fold my arms. “We need to set some ground rules, Sasha. You have fucked me over monumentally, and according to you, I’m stuck with it, but that doesn’t mean you get to treat me like a—”

I stop myself from saying the word. He knows how I used to live. Will he mock me now?

A shadow darkens his brow. “You’re my *wife*, and I’ll treat you as such. I can be very generous in more ways than one. Try me.”

The air seems to crackle with the electricity between us, and I despair of myself. I want to try him, all right. He knows it, too.

“So I have to share this room with you?”

“Yep.” Sasha sits on the chaise longue and leans back, crossing his hands behind his head. “And before you ask, I’m not sleeping on the floor, on this couch, hanging from the ceiling, or anywhere else. You and I will be sharing that bed.”

“I could try to see things from your perspective,” I seethe, “but I’m not sure I can get my head that far up my ass.”

Sasha grins. “*Zolotse*. I have neither the will nor the crayons to explain this to you. It’s not up for debate, okay?”

We stare each other down. I want to object, but it feels like to do so would be to admit that he’s getting to me. Better to act like it’s no big deal.

“Fine,” I say with a shrug. “But this bedroom sucks. I hate the decor—no texture or color anywhere. It’s like a hotel.”

He cocks his head. “So?”

“I hate hotels. I’ve spent too much time in them.”

I was a call girl for a long time, and I’ve seen too many fancy hotel rooms. It didn’t matter how sumptuous the surroundings were; it was always the same. Used by some rich loser who didn’t understand that I was a human being.

I didn’t mean to give away a weakness, but to my horror, something softens in Sasha’s face, and he understands. The teasing smirk vanishes, and he sits

up straight.

“Okay, *zlotse*. We’ll get some cushions or something.” He points at me. “Favorite color. Quickly.”

“Wine red and rose gold.”

“That’s two. Favorite fabric?”

“I don’t know. Velvet? I just like things that feel good on my skin.”

Sasha scans my body in half a second before his eyes return to mine, and I feel naked. My thin kimono covers me effectively, but my nipples are poking through the material, and I just *know* he’s noticed. The tip of his tongue traces his lower lip, nudging the silver ring, and my pussy tightens deep inside.

Why do I want him so much? It’s ridiculous. Just because he has that gorgeous hair and looks like a Slavic warrior of ages past? You’d think I’d have dealt with enough wealthy, arrogant bastards to last me a lifetime.

Sasha stands and closes the space between us. He thrusts his hands into his pockets as though he can’t trust himself not to reach for me. My neckline is too low, but I can’t move it, or I’ll draw attention to the issue.

Sasha leans forward and glances down. He raises his eyebrows, and although I should knee him in the balls, the look on his face sets me off laughing. It’s the nervous tension coming out inappropriately, but I can’t help it.

“When did you take your piercings out?”

Oh my God. He’s asking about my nipple bars.

“How did you know I had them?” I ask. I slap his chest. “You pervert!”

“Josie, you worked in my office for months. In the summer. Wearing tank tops. You can be mad at me for looking at your tits, but seriously—they were looking at *me*. How could I not have noticed?”

The tip of his tongue toys with his lip ring, and I shudder slightly. I’ve never been an object of genuine desire before. Men who use prostitutes think of them more as an everyday convenience. Something they use to make their

lives easier. Even my first boyfriend just said what he needed to get his way.

“You’re a piece of work,” I say. “All the women in the world, and you had to force *me* to marry you. Why?”

He frowns. “You don’t understand, Josie. I haven’t touched a woman since we met. You were the one I wanted, and when I thought I couldn’t have you, I didn’t care anymore.” He traces my collarbone with his fingertip. “I got you out of a bad situation with Marc, but I felt responsible for your well-being from there on out.”

“How honorable.”

“Fuck honorable,” he growls. “You’re *mine*. My wife. Anyone who’s fool enough to treat you like anything less than the princess you are will die painfully at my hands. You think I’m a prick; well, that’s okay. I’ve earned it. But from now on, you’ll stand by me and get the respect you fucking deserve.”

His eyes blaze, and I know he’s serious. However absurd the situation, he owns it, and me. I may not be able to escape for now, but my new husband is unwilling to settle for a marriage in name only.

“Don’t think you can make me have sex with you,” I say, stepping back. “I didn’t ask you to take a vow of celibacy and give me a starring role in your fantasies. If you wanna get laid, you can crawl up a chicken’s ass and wait.”

Sasha grins. “Charmed, I’m sure. I admit being enslaved by desire for you, and that’s all I get?”

“Why didn’t you tell me if you wanted me so much?” I ask.

“Because you’ve been through a lot, and I’m not the man to save you.”

I narrow my eyes. “But you still did. From Marc. So what’s the deal, Mr. Reluctant Hero?”

Sasha slides his eyes away from mine. “When you said you were leaving, I figured you’d be back before long. But I was wrong, and I didn’t stop thinking about you. And when I found out you were fucking *engaged*—”

Someone knocks on the door.

“See?” I whisper. “It’s easy. You can learn if you put your mind to it.”

He narrows his eyes. “Who is it?” he calls.

“Sorry to bother you,” Lilyana replies, her voice muffled. “But the guests have left, and you must present your bride to the *komissiya*. They’re waiting in the downstairs lounge.”

I shake my head. “No.”

Sasha grabs my hand. “Yes. They’re pissed off enough already.” I gesture at my kimono, and he sighs in exasperation. “Okay, whatever. Get dressed now. We have to go.”

He sounds just like Marc. I snatch my hand away and flip him off.

“Go with Lili and wait for me,” I say. “I’ll be there.”



Sasha

I wait outside the lounge, listening to the murmured conversation inside.

In both the mafia and the bratva, the exact terms of an honor oath are strictly between the individuals involved and are not the concern of their respective families. However, our *komissiya* expects marriages to be approved ahead of time. Not only had they already given their blessing to the union between Claudia and me, but now, I've gone and gotten myself married to someone else without their blessing or a single bratva witness, which is a severe breach of protocol. I need to hold my tongue and do whatever is necessary to get these whiny old fuckers off my back.

I didn't mean to tell Josie I wanted her. But she stood before me in her skimpy robe, her beautiful body calling to me, and I couldn't hide it anymore. She has no inkling of her effect on me, not just in that moment but in every moment since I first laid eyes on her.

She ruined me for all other women. She's taken my libido and locked it away, and unless she deigns to sleep with me, I'll remain celibate for life. There's no one else I want.

I'm married to the woman of my dreams, and she hates me for it. What a twisted joke this is turning out to be.

Josie appears at the bottom of the stairs. She wears slashed black jeans and a red cropped tank top, her hair fashioned into two buns. Her eyes are smudged with kohl, and her lips are adorned with a deep plum gloss. The floral tattoos on her chest and shoulders are on full display, and she's barefoot, which I find oddly enticing.

Two simultaneous thoughts assail me. One, she doesn't fit the mold of a typical bratva wife. Two, she looks stunning. Devastatingly so.

"You couldn't have toned it down?" I ask. "These men are not used to sexy-as-fuck alt girls."

"Urgh." Josie wrinkles her nose. "You make me sound like I'm trying too hard. This has been my style since high school; back then, it got me into

fighters. There's a name for it now?"

Before I can respond, Vlad opens the lounge door. He steps past us and holds the door open, signaling us to enter. "They want to speak with you both privately," he says. "Good luck."

Inside the lounge, Josie and I settle onto the couch. Five of the six *komissiya* members stand near the windows, but it's Igor Gusev who takes the lead in questioning us, sitting in the only other available seat.

Igor was a good friend of my father's; as a lawyer, he got us and many of our contemporaries out of tight spots over the years. The man is no partisan—his only loyalty is to the rules of our world, and he was elected to the *komissiya* leadership precisely because he's nobody's creature. So, given my blatant disregard for the laws he holds sacrosanct, Igor's scowl is to be expected. It's a good thing he and I are on reasonable terms.

"Is this your bride?" he asks.

"Igor," I say. "May I introduce Josephine Kisleva?"

Igor tilts his head, his gaze lingering on Josie. "You didn't use her middle name. Who is her father?"

Josie stands tall and answers defiantly, "I never knew my father, so I don't have a name to take. Is that a problem?"

Igor frowns but then softens as he takes in Josie's steady gaze. "I like you," he says with a wry smile. "I apologize for my rudeness, but your new spouse has put you both in a tight spot. It's my job to help him out of it."

"I don't see why he deserves any help," says Oleg. He's another long-standing member of our illustrious council, an antagonistic old fuck with a roll of flab hanging over his belt. "You expect favors, Sasha?"

I don't appreciate his condescending tone. While the circumstances surrounding our marriage might not be ideal, Josie is my wife. I promised her the respect she's due, and this pompous fossil is making a liar out of me.

"I'm only asking that my wife be treated with courtesy," I say through gritted teeth.

“Really?” Oleg asks incredulously. “When you’ve bestowed your family’s proud name on this rootless,” he pauses to sneer at Josie, “whatever *this* is?”

I reach out and take Josie’s hand firmly in mine. “I just told you how to address her. Are you bringing disrespect into it? She’s part of my family now.”

Oleg slaps his knee and bursts into laughter. “I knew I’d seen her before! I’ve seen this girl naked. She danced at my cousin’s birthday party a few years ago. He offered to pay extra to fuck her, but she refused and punched him square in the nose.”

The room falls silent as everyone’s attention turns to Josie. I’m horrified to see her shrink away, her hand slipping from mine. She wraps her arms around herself, trying to block out the humiliation.

Before I know I’m doing it, my hands are around the man’s throat. I tuck my foot behind his ankle, spin him as he loses his balance, and smash his face into the wall.

Chaos erupts as people shout and scramble to pull me away, but I’m stronger than all of these aging bratva members combined. Amidst the commotion, the only voice that reaches me is Josie’s.

“Stop it, Sasha!” she cries. “That’s enough!”

I let go, and the man wheezes as he slides down the wall. The others haul him to his feet as he struggles to breathe. Igor still sits on the armchair, and I turn to him, flexing my fingers.

“My wife’s past is irrelevant.” I look over my shoulder. “And if anyone speaks of it again in my presence, I’ll take them apart. I don’t give a fuck who it is or what the consequences may be, so consider yourselves warned.”

Oleg gets to his feet, clutching his mottled neck. “Mark my words, boy,” he says coolly. “This woman will bring nothing but trouble. You could have settled down with a respectable mafia girl like your father did. Instead, you’ve chosen her? It’s hardly surprising that you show us no respect, considering you don’t even have enough self-regard to marry well.”

Igor is not *komandir* for nothing—the man is as still as a statue, his expression unruffled. The room becomes still as his gravitas pulls everyone into line.

“Keep your stupid mouth shut, Oleg.” Igor glances at him. “That was uncalled for.”

I’ve had enough of this. “I understand I need to meet with your approval,” I say. “What do you want from me, Igor?”

“I will overlook your altercation with Oleg,” Igor concedes, nodding toward the man I throttled, who now clutches a glass of whiskey with trembling hands. “He deserved it, but you went too far. My long association with your family gets you only one pass, so we’ll let it slide, and you owe him five hundred thousand in compensation.”

“For that?” Oleg is apoplectic with fury. “That’s ridiculous! I want—”

“I said shut up.” Igor’s voice is even, but Oleg is still silenced. “You’d think, after Sasha almost strangled you to death, you’d learn to hold your damn tongue.” He addresses me again. “As for your marriage, you will hold a proper ceremony within the next three weeks, and by that time, you must also settle your debt with Sal Tosca. Then the bratva will accept your wife, and this ugly mess will be behind us. Is that clear?”

I’m getting off lightly, and we both know it. I bow my head in deference. “Fine,” I say through clenched teeth. “Now, can I see out my wedding night in peace?”

Igor smiles and stands. “Of course. You need to find your wife.”

I glance around and realize Josie is gone. I never noticed her leave the room, but she must have slipped out while we talked. I ignore the *komissiya* men and leave without another word, darting out of the lounge and running up the stairs. Josie’s purse, phone, and shoes are all missing from the suite.

I find Vlad and Arman in the kitchen.

“How’d it go?” Arman asks. “Good to see you’re still alive.”

I'm in no mood for jokes. "Josie ran out on me," I say. "I gotta find her. You know what to do."



One hour later...

Josie

I pull Sasha's jacket around my shoulders and sink lower in my seat, trying to fade into the background.

A bus station in the evening is a dangerous place to be. Men slink outside like lions at the edge of a herd, looking for the weak, naive, or lonely. Ready with a kind word, an offer of food and shelter.

My mom met my father under these exact circumstances. Running away, looking for safety and security. My father took her home, fed her, and gave her a warm bed. After a few days, he shared his drugs, too, and the sweet sting of heroin made all the fear disappear.

Mom didn't know whether he was really my father, but the truth didn't matter. He would have claimed me for himself one way or another, using me as a pawn to keep my mother docile and under his control. As soon as she saw that blue line on the test strip, she knew she had to escape.

She attacked one of her nastiest clients, intending to get arrested, and was jailed for aggravated assault and soliciting. Her incarceration saved her life; she got sober and gave birth to me in a specialist mother-and-baby unit upstate. She was just seventeen years old.

My mother fought for me. I spent the five years she was imprisoned in an orphanage, but I visited her consistently. She earned privileges through hard work and endured regular beatings from the other inmates, who resented her special treatment. None of it mattered; she did whatever it took to see me. When she was finally released, we moved into a tiny, run-down apartment in Queens, and she took a job as a cleaner at the New York Public Library.

Those were good times. We had nothing in terms of material wealth, but we were happy. I loved her, she loved me, and that was all we needed.

Then everything fell apart.

I squeeze my eyes shut, unwilling to face the human wreckage around me. These young souls believe the city streets are paved with gold, and in a way, they're right. But the riches aren't meant for them. Malevolent forces lurk everywhere, ready to profit from their suffering.

I go outside and lean against the wall, breathing deeply and trying to calm down. My breath makes little clouds in the cold air, and I'm glad I have Sasha's jacket. I'm even more grateful for the money clip tucked inside the inner pocket, which paid for my Greyhound ticket with plenty left over.

I ran out of the Kislev mansion with no plan except to leave. Sasha knows about my past—or some of it, at least—and so do others. Having that old man recognize me was a humiliation too far. I'll never be allowed to forget where I came from, and I'll never feel safe, either.

Sasha had the gall to steal my name and my freedom for his own ends, only to pretend he did it to help me? To keep me from being miserable with Marc?

The two men aren't so different. Sasha may make my pulse race whenever he's near, but that doesn't mean he isn't using me. He didn't want to keep his promise to the Toscas, so he put me in danger to avoid his responsibilities. He's possessive and speaks of respect, but he just wants my body.

Big deal. I've given myself away so many times that it's a miracle there's anything left of me.



A coffee shack beside the bus station is bedecked with string lights. I approach the counter, and the man inside smiles at me.

“Let me guess, pretty girl. Coffee with cream and sugar?”

“How did you know?” I ask, slapping a bill on the counter.

“I didn't.” He turns away to pour the drink. “But it's late, and there are no buses for a while, so I figure you got a long wait and nowhere warm to sit. And I ain't never known a girl who doesn't love sweet coffee.” He nods at the door in the back of the shack. “I got a bench. Come sit outta sight. Too

many creeps around here, and I seen a couple lookin' your way."

I scoot around the back of the shack and sit. The man opens the door and leans out, holding a large cardboard cup.

"Here ya go, babe."

I reach for the coffee. Without warning, the man drops the drink and grabs my wrist, trying to drag me through the door.

"C'mon, you stupid bitch, don't fuck me about," he says. I look past him into the shack and see he's closed the shutter. "Suck me off, and I'll let you stay here until the bus is due. Otherwise, I'll throw you to my friends out there, and believe me, they will expect a lot more from you."

I fight desperately, my voice caught in my throat. I clench my teeth and kick out, trying to create some distance between us, but the man yanks my arm and brings my body closer to his. He spins me around so that I'm facing away from him, pressing me against the side of the shack. His sweat is repugnant in my nostrils, and he fumbles with his pants.

No. I won't let this happen.

With a violent backward jerk of my head, I smash my assailant's nose with a sickening crunch. He yelps but doesn't release me. Instead, he grips a fistful of my hair, and I cry out in pain.

Unexpectedly, he lets go, and I crumple to the ground, rolling over the gravel.

I look back to see my attacker face-down on the sharp stones, Sasha straddling his back.

"Are you alright?" Sasha asks. He raises his fists simultaneously and brings them down, slamming them into the man's temples.

"Assuming you mean me, yes," I say.

Sasha hits the man again. "Good." He looks up at me. "Did you think you could run away from me? In my city?"

"You know what?" I stand, dusting myself down. "For a minute there, yeah. I thought it was gonna be that easy."

“It took me less than thirty minutes to find you.” Sasha punches the man in the back of the head, drawing a pained gurgle. “We have so many watchers. All I had to do was set people up at the airports, train stations, and bus terminals. Lo and behold—you showed up here.”

The man has stopped moaning, blood staining the ground beneath his prone body. Sasha rolls him onto his back and rummages in his pockets, producing a grubby wallet. “So,” he reads the man’s ID, “Carlos. You’re a procurement guy, I take it. Flesh for cash, with perks when you can get them?”

Carlos couldn’t answer if he wanted to. He lifts his head feebly, only to collapse to the ground again. Sasha gets to his feet, giving him a kick as he does so.

“This territory belongs to Tosca,” Sasha says to me, “so this guy does too.” He frowns at the blood on his shirt cuffs and rolls up his sleeves, revealing his tattoos. “It’s a shitty coincidence and one more thing for Sal to be mad about, but I can’t let this fucker live.”

“Because he’ll tell Tosca it was you who beat him?”

Sasha frowns. “No. Because he dared to put his dirty hands on my wife.” He reaches behind him and pulls a small pistol from the holster at his back, leveling it at Carlos’s head. “If you don’t wanna see this, Josie, look away.”

I stand my ground, and Sasha nods, impressed.

“That’s my girl.”

The shot rings out, and Carlos is silenced. Sasha holsters the gun and walks toward me, but as he draws near, my vision swims. My knees buckle, and Sasha darts forward, catching me as I fold to the ground.

“Steady, Josie. I got you.”



Sasha

Josie is asleep in bed. *Our* bed.

When I got her to the car, she was barely conscious, her arms clutching onto my neck. I didn't want to let her go, but I had no choice but to drive. So, I gently laid her across the back seat, my concern for her growing with every mile we covered. I checked her over, assuring myself that she was physically unharmed. Deep down, I suspected it was the adrenaline draining from her system that had caused her to collapse.

I sit in the chair beside her, watching as her body rises and falls evenly. She gave me a hell of a scare, running away like that, but I must admit she was doing an excellent job of fighting that fucker off when I got there. My wife has had a rough life, and I don't want her ever to have to deal with that shit again. I'm not sure what led her to run away from me, but it seems everything caught up with her at once.

I wanted her for myself and didn't care about the consequences. Now, she's married to me, trapped in a world where people know about her past. There's no room for pretense, lies, or hiding, not even from herself.

And for what? Marc Bonneville might have been a complete asshole, but I'm not much better. I hate that she got away from me the first time, so I'm determined to break down her defenses. After all, I'm not accustomed to being rejected. I also relish the challenge of bantering with her, the intellectual sparring she brings into my life. She's smart and doesn't back down from me, and that's a refreshing change I'd love to get used to. Is that enough justification for keeping her in a forced marriage? No, it isn't. But I can be a selfish bastard when I truly want something.

My wife will beg for my touch. I can keep myself in check until her pretty mouth quits the sass and starts with the pleading. I've done it before.

I check my watch. *I'm late. Gotta go.*



I leave the suite and stop by the kitchen, collecting a tray of lasagne from the refrigerator.

Josie is still fast asleep, and I'm not taking any chances. I place a quick call and pull one of our guys away from his poker game to keep watch over the house. Gustav isn't thrilled about it, but he knows better than to protest, and I toss him some extra cash for his trouble. It's a few blocks walk, so I pull on a heavy woolen overcoat, turning up the collar to keep the wind out.

Lilyana and her twin brother Avel weren't born until I was eighteen, and Arman wasn't around then either. Vlad and I were the only kids in the house for years, and my father was preoccupied with my brother. I got out of the house as much as possible, especially if Mama wasn't around.

Rocco Ginelli became my friend during those times. He lived just a few streets away, an honest working-class kid with a single mom. Our mothers were friends who hailed from the same part of Tuscany, and they would share recipes, cook together, and occasionally go to the movies when they could carve out some free time.

Eventually, some lowlife had a run-in with my father and rashly decided to seek retribution by targeting a Kislev kid. One evening, Rocco and I were hanging near the park when a guy drove past in a loud sedan.

The whole thing happened so fast. In seconds, Rocco was dead on the ground from a bullet meant for me. I could do nothing but shout as the car sped away. Signora Ginelli, his mother, rushed out of her apartment, her apron flapping, and the image of her distraught face as she cradled her son's lifeless body remains etched in my memory.

Rocco was only sixteen when he died—two years younger than me. That tragedy took place twenty years ago, and during all those years I looked after Signora G, she never once held me responsible for her son's death.

Signora G never married, and she never said a word about Rocco's father either. She's an old woman now and getting kinda dotty, forgetting to do things, getting confused. She refuses to leave her apartment, so I do what I can to help.

I insert the key into the lock and let myself into her building. She's asleep in her armchair, an electric blanket draped over her knees.

"*Madonna!*" I exclaim, rushing to flip the switch. "That's dangerous, you'll burn yourself!"

Signora G blinks sleepily at me. "Hello, Sasha," she says. "How's your mama?"

My mother passed away shortly after the twins were born, just weeks after Rocco's death. It felt like I had lost all the security in my life at once. If it weren't for Vlad, I don't know what would have become of me. But I spiraled out of control, and it took me over a decade to clean up my act.

Signora G often forgets that my mama is long gone. I don't want to remind her of the painful truth, so I let it slide.

"She's okay," I reply. "Have you eaten today?"

"I had coffee and a pastry this morning," she says with a grin. I roll my eyes as I put the lasagne in the microwave, and she laughs at my concern. "Oh, stop looking at me like that, *mio prezioso*. Old people don't eat much. I only have a good meal daily because you cook it for me."

I pour her a glass of San Pellegrino and arrange her tray, setting it on her lap. "Now be careful," I caution her. "The lasagna is hot. While you wait for it to cool, tell me your news."

"It's my birthday tomorrow," she says brightly. "Isn't that exciting?"

"I know," I respond with a smile. She drops her fork, and I retrieve it, gently placing it back in her hand. "I'll bring you a present."

It's not her birthday. Instead, it would have been her son's thirty-fifth. But her mind holds onto the date, even if the significance has faded.

Signora G takes a bite of lasagna and smiles at me. "You're a good son, Rocco."

Her other hand settles on the armrest, and I cover it with mine. Her skin is cold.

She's called me Rocco before, but lately, it happens every time I visit. She's deteriorating, her moments of confusion becoming more frequent.

"I get scared sometimes," she says. "Men come in here and talk to me."

She says this stuff now and again. Men visit her, the cat she hasn't got is missing, the mailman is a spy. I usually just move past it so she doesn't get upset.

"I'll make sure your bed is comfortable," I tell her. "You finish your food now."

Signora G laughs. She's already forgotten all about her fear. She winks and waves her fork at me.

"Whatever you say, *capo*."



At home, I head straight to my bedroom. I'm not in the mood to discuss the day's events; it's almost unbelievable that I haven't been married for twenty-four hours yet.

Part of me knows I should give Josie some space. But she ran away from me tonight and straight into trouble. I'll keep her safe, but I'm not gonna love her; I don't have it in me to let her into my heart. I just need to slake my thirst for her and ease my obsession, so I can fucking think straight.

Josie is still out for the count. I get undressed in the dark and lie beside her on the duvet.

One way or another, my wife will learn that her place is at my side.



Josie

I wake from a dream about my mom. It always happens when I fall asleep on my back—I get scared that I'm choking to death, just like she did. I sit up quickly, gulping the air, before I realize I'm okay.

Sasha sleeps on his back beside me, his powerful arms folded behind his head. His breathing is even and deep. He wears nothing but white jersey trunks and a slight smile.

The fucker. He's sleeping next to me for the second night in a row without my consent or knowledge. I'm tempted to slap him in the nuts and give him the mother of all wake-up calls, but I decide against it.

For the first time, I have a chance to feast my eyes without him knowing it, and he's really something. His body is chiseled, every muscle carved by exercise and his Italian-Russian lineage. His sheer size is intimidating up close, and it's like being beside some great animal. His dark hair spreads over the pillow, his lip ring catching the light.

I let my eyes travel along his flank, my gaze drifting lower. A gasp of shock escapes me, and I clap my hand over my mouth.

Sasha's erection stretches the fabric of his underwear. The material holds it down somewhat, but there's no hiding it. That's some extensive real estate he has there.

I glance at his face, making sure he's definitely asleep. *Yep.* His eyelids aren't even twitching. I sit up on my elbow and get closer, my mouth falling open.

What the hell is he dreaming about?

I didn't believe him when he said he hadn't had sex since he met me. That was months ago. Could a man as virile as Sasha have lived like a monk all that time?

I want to touch him. To take that girthy cock in my hand and feel the heat. As I watch, a tiny bead of moisture darkens the fabric straining at the tip, and I lick my lips.

“Goddamn it, Sasha,” I whisper. “Is that mine? Are you dreaming about *me*?”

I feel my wetness dampening my inner thighs, and I squeeze them together. It’s all I can do not to free his cock and straddle him. I’m soaked already—I could just slide that thick length right into me. Really stretch my needy little hole until I can’t take any more...

I slip my hand into my pajama shorts, feeling for my clit. My fingertip brushes it, and I almost yelp aloud as a bolt of pleasure jolts through me. The tiny button is so sensitive already. I press down and shift the pad of my finger gently, shuddering with bliss as my pussy clutches at nothing. Sasha moves in his sleep, turning his head slightly toward me, but he does not wake.

Oh my God. Stay asleep. Or wake up, see what I’m doing, and bury your fucking gigantic cock in my dripping pussy. Give me the come you’ve been saving up just for me. An early Christmas present, perhaps?

I roll onto my front and raise my ass, pretending that Sasha is behind me. I work my clit as I imagine him opening me up, my entrance aching as it gives way to him. My eyes are closed as I flex my internal walls, almost able to feel it. Would he pull my hair? Slap my ass? Call me his slut?

Where did *that* come from? I’ve been called a slut before by clients, and I hated it, but it would sure hit differently if Sasha said it.

Before I think about why, I realize the thought has carried me away, and my climax is about to hit. I bury my face in the pillow and moan as I come, ecstasy radiating through my core and filling my entire body. My pussy reacts with a fresh gush of moisture, soaking my hand.

For long minutes, I dare not move. What if I open my eyes and see Sasha looking at me?

Eventually, the arm trapped beneath me goes numb, and I have to shift my weight. I wince as blood rushes to my hand, making it tingle. Sasha slept through the whole thing, his cock still at full mast.

I just came harder than ever before, but God knows I still want that inside me. Sasha is a man who likes to fuck—if it’s really been months since he got laid, he’d probably wreck me. The thought makes my pussy feel hollow, as though it wants to find out what it’s missing, but I won’t wake him.

This is ridiculous. I just got done masturbating beside the man I ran away from only hours ago...*wait*. What actually happened? I was at the bus station, and then...?

He *rescued* me, that's what.

He killed Marc. He killed the disgusting wannabe rapist at the bus shelter. Is there anything my new bratva husband won't do for me? Or *to* me?

I can tell myself he's the hateful son of a bitch who forced me to be his wife, and maybe that's true, but it doesn't change the fact that he was there and stopped me from getting hurt. Again.

Belonging to Sasha Kislev isn't all bad—he takes his responsibility as my protector seriously. Maybe there's a chance we can turn this stupid situation around and make the best of it.

Sleep is nudging at my consciousness, and I roll away, closing my eyes.



Ten minutes earlier...

Sasha

I lie as still as possible. My cock aches, over-pumped and desperately in need of attention. Josie's attention.

I haven't had sex in months, but God knows I've jerked off many times, and I imagined this exact scenario. I can't open my eyes, move, or shift my weight for fear of alerting her that I am more awake than she thinks. Because I'm sure my wife would not be touching herself beside me if she thought I knew about it.

Her tiny sounds are driving me crazy. Sweet little gasps. Moans she tries to catch before releasing them aloud.

I tense my muscles, making my cock twitch slightly. It does nothing to relieve the deep throb in my loins.

Why am I just lying here? Why don't I say something? *Do something?*

I could roll over now and get involved. Bury my cock in Josie's warm pussy and feel her gripping me, like she does in all my lurid fantasies.

But I've caught her in a private act. She thinks I'm asleep, and it's all I can do to maintain the charade.

The mattress shifts as Josie rolls away from me, and for a moment, I think she's getting out of bed. Then her face appears beside mine, close enough to feel her hot breath moving my hair. I peer through barely-parted lids to see she's on her front, her peachy ass in the air.

Bozhe moy. She doesn't know how much I love to fuck from behind, but damn, do I wanna show her. I can imagine that pretty little cunt, glistening with juice, her tight little hole inviting me in. My cock stretching her. Grabbing that raven hair and pulling her back onto me as I—

She's coming. Her voice is muffled as she gasps her pleasure into the pillow, and I gulp hard. My cock pulsates, and I wonder if I'm gonna come too, just from watching her.

Josie's panting gives way to low, soft breathing. Still, I wait until I'm sure before turning to look at her. She's facing away from me, her body moving gently as she sleeps. I wanna jerk off more than anything, but I might wake her if I move. I stare at the ceiling, contemplating getting up and stealing to the bathroom to relieve the tension.

My eyes close again. *I'll give it a few minutes.*



When I wake up, I'm way too warm. I shift my body and realize where I am.

I'm holding Josie, my arms wrapped around her. She has her back to me, sleeping soundly, her soft hair beneath my cheek. Her ass is nestled against my hips, her legs entwined with mine.

When the fuck did *this* happen? Last I knew, I was nursing a painful erection and trying not to wake her.

Josie sighs and stretches, rubbing her ass against me. I'm developing a problem again, and as my cock thickens, I resist the urge to grind against her.

Either I'm gonna move away or closer. But I'm sure as hell gonna move *somewhere*.

I slide my hand over Josie's thigh and settle on her hip, holding her to me. She's wearing a tank top and boy shorts, light and thin. My other arm grips her waist, and she arches her back slightly, pushing harder against my burgeoning erection.

This woman has no idea what she's doing to me. Is she even awake? The urge to rip her shorts and fill her pussy is almost overwhelming, but I don't wanna take anything from her. I want her to give herself to me. *Beg*, even. I haven't waited this long to ruin it now.

My cock doesn't agree. It's throbbing now, thick and hard between Josie's soft inner thighs. I move my hips back and forth, creating a little friction, and she moans sweetly.

I press against her more firmly, and she gives a sharp gasp.

Ah. My piercing hit the spot.

I begin to move her body, sliding along her pussy lips. I can feel their plumpness through the thin fabric of her shorts, and my jockeys aren't exactly providing much protection—not with her wetness soaking into them.

Her little whispered sighs are getting to me. I can't see her face, and neither of us has spoken, but a shared pact of silence hangs in the air.

If she doesn't say anything, she can pretend she dreamed it. Tell herself she doesn't want to fuck the man who killed her fiancé and forced her to marry him.

If I stay silent, I can get what I want. I'm obsessed with her, and I don't like it. It makes me feel weak. All I need to do is get her out of my system. One hard, cathartic fuck to loosen her grip on my soul, and then I can get back to where I belong.

In control.

All I have to do is reach down and slide her shorts aside. She's soaked, and I'm slick with her juice and my pre-come; I'd slide right in, all the way to the hilt. No resistance.

I slip my hand between us and free my cock, letting her feel the heat as I press it against her sex once more. Her clit is so swollen I can feel it through the material, and as I nudge it, I feel my control ebbing away.

“No. Don't.”

Josie's voice is breathy and so quiet I barely hear her. But there's no denying what she said.

“You're dripping for me, *zlotse*,” I murmur, holding her tighter. “Who are you trying to fool? I know what you did when you thought I was asleep.”

Her body stiffens in my grasp, but she makes only a token effort to release herself from my grip. “You fucking asshole. All you had to do was say something, move, anything. But you lay there and played possum while your massive dick just did its thing?”

I press myself hard against her. “*This* is my dick doing its thing, *moya zhen*. And there’s so much more I’ve got for you. Every inch, every drop of come. I’ll fill you up until you can’t remember how to resist.”

Her hands grab at me, gripping me tight, and I know her resolve is crumbling away like sand. But I still wanna hear her say it.

“Come on,” I whisper, slipping my fingers over her sex and working her clit through the fabric. “Beg for it. Beg me to give it to you, and I will.”

She hisses through gritted teeth. “Never. You want me, and it’s all I’ve got over you. You think I’d give that up after everything you’ve taken from me?”

She’s right. My desire for her is killing me. If I don’t feel her pussy around my cock soon, I will lose my mind.

“Okay,” I say. “Go ahead and deny yourself. But this time, I’m gonna be the one who makes you moan.”

Josie drops her head back against my chest as I touch her. “Stop fucking talking. Just keep doing what you’re doing.”

Her thighs are soaked with her wetness. She clasps them together, trapping my cock between them, and the warm tightness feels incredible. As I move against her, my abdomen tightens, my impending climax gathering within. I find a rhythm, thrusting as I massage her clit. It throbs beneath my fingertip, and she gives a strangled cry as her body tenses.

“Oh, Sasha.”

Fuck. I love it when she says my name. I don’t care if it’s a yell of rage or a sigh of ecstasy—just hearing it form on those sweet lips makes me wanna fall to my knees in worship.

“You come for me now,” I say. My voice catches as she squeezes my cock between her thighs, pushing me over the edge. I bury my face in her hair and

snarl, coating her skin in my come as her pleasure soaks us both.

We lie still for a long time, and I listen to Josie's breathing. Eventually, she slides from my arms and sits on the edge of the bed. Without another word, she pads into the ensuite and closes the door. Buck-naked, I roll onto my back, unsure what to do.

I made her come, and I'll replay that in my mind daily until the day I die. But I didn't fuck her. I could have—I don't believe she'd have been able to resist if she tried—but I don't want her to hate me any more than she already does.

She's used to men treating her like shit. I don't wanna be just another user.

I'm not her client. I'm her husband. And if I expect people to treat her respectfully, it's gotta start with me.



The next morning...

Josie

I rest my forehead against the tile wall of the shower. The steady stream of water on the back of my neck revives me, and I lather up the shower gel, washing away the night's events. Sasha's come is still sticky on my thighs, but if it weren't for that, I would have thought the whole thing happened in my head.

I could have stopped him. But I felt safe with his heat and strength wrapped around me. I felt *wanted*.

He wants me to beg, but I can't. I *won't*. He doesn't know how much pleading I've done, and it never got me anywhere. My power over Sasha is heady, and I can't bring myself to hand it over, however much I want to.

Am I gonna deny myself more of the same? I don't think I could ever get enough. But obsessive and rough though he is, Sasha didn't push. He didn't try anything, even when I lay beside him and got myself off. It was only when we found ourselves in each other's arms that it got out of hand. Even then, with little more than a sliver of material between him and my hungry pussy, he heard me say no and *listened*.

That kind of self-mastery is so hot. It takes a real man to keep himself in check rather than lose control. Marc couldn't have done that in a million years, and more to the point, he wouldn't have cared to try.

I close my eyes and stifle a groan of embarrassment. It's gonna be challenging to maintain my aloof, standoffish position now. What's my plan?

I dry off and dress quickly, grateful to have my own clothes. I don't want to risk waking Sasha with the noise of the hairdryer, so I style my hair in two braids. With my eyeshadow and darkly blushed lips, I look like a regular Wednesday Addams.

When I emerge from the bathroom, Sasha is awake, propped up against the pillows. He's reading *The New Yorker*, coffee in hand, a tray beside him.

"Good morning," he says. "Dulcie brought some breakfast. Salmon, scrambled eggs, the works."

I'm about to decline, but the smell of the food catches in my nose, and I realize I'm ravenous. I sit on the bed beside him and pick up a plate, piling egg onto a slice of toast.

"So I guess you're mad at me," I say. "For running away."

Sasha shrugs. "It's understandable but not to be tolerated." He leans forward. "Look at me, Josie."

I slide my eyes to his. His gaze is composed but intense enough to melt rocks.

"There is nowhere you could go," he says. "No one will shelter you. No person in a thousand miles is fool enough to cross me for your sake." His jaw clenches, betraying his suppressed anger. "I gave you my name. I own you now. Is that in any way unclear?"

"I guess not."

He may own me, but it's not just because of our forced marriage. His touch on my body is his way of marking his territory, and he knows what happened last night. Despite all my arguments, my response to him revealed my desire. It's a chaotic situation, and I want to resent him for dragging me into it, but the magnetic pull between us is undeniable.

I abruptly stand up, needing some distance from the charged atmosphere. "So, what are your plans today?" I ask.

He frowns. "*My* plans? Whatever I do, you will be doing with me."

"But I wanted to hang out with Morgana today. Go to a spa or something."

Sasha sets down his coffee. "Another time, *zlotse*. We will be choosing a wedding venue. The *komissiya* insist we hold another ceremony so they can attend, and we can't do it in church as the legal side is already in place."

“Awesome. Maybe you can refer to me as your unlawfully wedded wife? Coercion is against the law, you know.”

He grins. “I do a lot of illegal things. How much do you think I care? Maybe I’ll go for ‘awfully wedded wife.’ That’s pretty accurate.”

I laugh despite myself. He’s six foot three, tattooed from head to toe, scarred and hardened from a life of violence, yet somehow still the goofiest idiot I’ve ever met.

“You’re an asshole, Sasha. I hate your voice, your hair, your tattoos, your stupid buff body, your fucking annoying handsome face, and *especially* your massive—”

“Brain?” Sasha raises an eyebrow. “Just go with that. No need to say what you’re really thinking.”

“I was thinking ‘ego,’” I reply. “Presumably, you got so muscular from carrying that around everywhere?”

He nods. “I knew it. You like my body, huh? You want this big hunk of—”

I grab a cushion and hurl it at him, but he catches it easily and tosses it back, hitting me squarely in the face. He bursts into laughter, and so do I.

“Stop acting out now.” He sits on the edge of the bed, a corner of the duvet hiding his junk, and I see he’s naked. “You’re so hot when you’re angry. If you escalate the hostilities, I’ll come at you hard.” He chuckles at my flustered expression. “Make of that what you will.”

He’s so damn cocky. I don’t know whether I wanna slap his face or ride it. I sit in the chair and cover my eyes.

“Okay, I surrender. Now put some clothes on.”

When I sneak a glimpse, Sasha is wearing pants and buttoning up his white shirt. He catches me looking and shoots me a knowing glance.

“Look all you want, *moya zhena*,” he teases.

“Oh shut up, Sasha,” I snap, annoyed at being caught out. “What wedding venues?”

“Wherever you want, obviously.” He straightens his collar. “I’ll buy whatever time and date works for us. No price is too high.” He sweeps his hand through his hair. “I stole you to be my bride and hijacked your cheap-ass shitty wedding to do it. You deserve better, and I’ll make sure you get it.”



Every hotel is the same. Beautiful, opulent, and desperate for our business. One flash of Sasha’s credit card and events managers practically trip over themselves to offer us wedding packages.

Yet, despite the extravagance, nothing feels right. I’ve never been a fan of hotels, and all the money in the world can’t change that. My head is all screwed up; why am I letting this man get to me?

I watch him as he moves, lean and irresistibly sexy in his slacks and Gucci shirt. He’s wilder-looking and rougher around the edges than Vlad, but damn. Those Kislev boys have got it, and Sasha is my type, from his tattoos to his pierced—

Don’t think about that now.

The wedding coordinator at The Plaza has eyes like Bambi. She hasn’t thrown me as much as a glance in the hour we’ve been here.

“So, Mr. Kislev—may I call you Sasha?” Bambi flutters her lashes prettily. “That’s the tour. Do you think you will,” she lowers her voice, arching a laminated brow, “need me?”

I look Bambi up and down. She epitomizes the Clean Girl aesthetic, and I feel grubby beside her. My inked skin and raven hair contrast sharply with her blonde, baby-faced vibe. And I don’t like how she looks at my man.

That’s right. *My man*. Because that’s what he is. We’re married, and if he insists on treating me like a real wife, maybe it’s time I return the favor.

Sasha turns to me. “Your thoughts?”

I fix Bambi with a pointed glare. “I think this bitch needs to back the fuck off.”

Sasha fights back a smirk. “Whatever’s the matter, *zlotse*?”

Bambi is avoiding my eyes, but she knows. All women can distinguish between professional rapport and out-and-out flirting; she knows she overstepped. She doesn’t know how pissed off I am about it, though, and honestly, I’m surprised at myself.

“I—I didn’t mean to create an atmosphere,” Bambi stammers. “If you’d like me to pass you on to a colleague—”

“No,” I snap. “I don’t like it here anyway. Just leave us alone.”

Bambi gives Sasha a beseeching look, and he shrugs in a ‘whaddayagonnado’ way. He’s teasing me, enjoying my anger.

He knows what he did to me last night. Tore down my defenses and made me want him, only to demand even more?

He wanted me to beg for his body. To demean myself. And when I refused, he made me come anyway, leaving me confused and strangely humiliated even as the aftershocks thrummed through my core.

When I came out of the bathroom, he was asleep again, and I was simultaneously relieved and angry. How could he shrug it off so casually? It was the same this morning; we buried the tension under banter, and so far, it’s worked.

But not anymore. It’s as though the morning of trailing around ever more elaborate wedding venues has worn me out in more ways than one. The dreamlike strangeness of it all is retreating like the tide, leaving jagged rocks of reality in its wake.

I want more from Sasha than he’s willing to give. It’s not just about the way he dominates, the obsession, or the control. I want to unravel the layers he keeps hidden beneath his macho exterior. He tries to project the image of an open book, but I can see the walls he’s erected around his heart. Maybe he’s hiding as much from himself as from the rest of the world.



Sasha

I knew I'd push things too far. It wasn't intentional, but I've always been known for going over the edge.

The fawning blonde couldn't hold my attention for a nanosecond if her life depended on it. She reeked of desperation, too eager to please, too obvious in her intent. I've encountered a thousand women like her in the mafia world, churned out by its unforgiving gears.

Strangely enough, she reminds me of Claudia Tosca. That same fragile beauty with an underlying manic edge. Claudia would've probably driven me to madness, but at least my heart wouldn't be at risk like it is now.

In the *bratva*, a marriage is only as strong as the paper it's written on, but my thoughts keep drifting back to the vows I made. The promise I uttered, even as I gripped Josie's wrist. It's as if some deep, buried part of me is under siege, not by an army, but by one beautiful woman. A woman with fire in her belly and a smile that makes me want to devote my life to her happiness.

I think about last night. Breathing hotly in Josie's ear, grinding against her, touching her...it was all too real. I knew I wanted her, sure, but something happened to me. Whatever it was is not clear yet, but something changed, and when I woke up this morning, I quickly got the mask back in place. I must keep the upper hand until I can get my head on straight.

It's not easy. My new wife is sharp-witted and sardonic, and although I'm usually on the receiving end of her jabs, I love it. I was going for wry aloofness, but it dissolved in no time, and I found myself laughing hopelessly at her flirty insults. Despite my attempts to dazzle her with an unlimited budget for our do-over wedding, she remains unimpressed, and I wonder if she's as distracted as I am.

So why am I deliberately baiting her, pushing her buttons? Maybe it's because I'm an asshole.

I leave the wedding coordinator standing in the lobby and head for the bar. It takes me a moment to spot Josie, but when I do, my stomach drops.

She's engaged in conversation with a man I know. Freddy De Silva is a police captain, and his precinct covers where we conduct much of our business. He's been a valuable friend to our family, keeping low-level troublemakers away from our turf and conveniently looking the other way when we handle things on our own. Not that he hasn't reaped the benefits; how many cops can afford the latest Rolex?

Freddy puts his arm around Josie's waist. He leans down to speak into her ear, and she gives a tinkling laugh. She puts her palm on his chest, and he gives her a look I know all too well.

He wants her. That cunt wants my wife.

My first impulse is to kill him, but should I really commit a murder in broad daylight in a high-profile hotel? Even if we booked their wedding package, I doubt "homicide victim disposal and cover-up" is part of the deal, even without the many witnesses enjoying their cocktails.

I'm beside Josie and Freddy before I realize I've moved my feet. I snatch Josie's hand from Freddy's chest, clasping it in mine.

"Freddy," I say, not even trying to keep the sharp edge off of my voice. "You've met my wife?"

Freddy looks like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "Sasha. How's it going?" He extends his hand for a shake, but I ignore it. "You shouldn't leave a beautiful woman alone. There are all sorts of snakes around here, and money and elegance don't necessarily make people good."

"How true," Josie says pointedly, extracting her hand from mine. "It was lovely to meet you, Freddy. See you around."

She walks away, but I hang back. Freddy gulps as I draw closer to him—I have at least a fifty-pound weight advantage, and every bit is muscle. If I wanted to mess him up, I could do it without breaking a sweat.

"This is your only warning," I say. I tuck my hand inside my jacket. "Lay a finger on my wife again, and I'll end you."

Freddy clears his throat and tries not to cower. "You know you can't kill a cop, Sasha. The *komissiya* won't stand for it. Especially over something so

insignificant.” Freddy’s quivering lip steadies, curling into a sneer. “I mean, you’ve had so many women. What’s so special about *this* one that you married it?”

A specific type of weak, pathetic man refers to a woman as ‘it.’ But Freddy De Silva referred to my wife as ‘it,’ and that’s something else entirely.

I palm the Harpy knife, flicking my wrist to free the blade from its housing. Freddy’s reaction time is blunted by alcohol, and he doesn’t grasp what I’m doing until it’s too late. In an instant, the blade slashes through his shirtfront, carving a shallow but painful gash across his soft belly.

Freddy opens his mouth, but no sound escapes. I pocket the knife and glance over my shoulder to see Josie seated at a nearby table, staring at us in disbelief.

“You’re fucking crazy, you know that?” Freddy splutters, clutching his split shirt to his chest as the red patch spreads. “Yours isn’t the only mafia family I’m friendly with, you know. Do you think I’m that stupid?” He spits as he speaks. “You have no fucking idea what’s coming to you, Sasha. You’ve made some important enemies.”

Like this fat fuck can make problems for me. If he weren’t a cop, he’d already be dead.

I grip his collar to keep him on his feet. “I don’t wanna set eyes on you ever again,” I say. “You no longer work for us. Do we understand one another, Freddy?”

“That was uncalled for—*Jesus!*” He grips the bar. “I’m *bleeding*, man!”

“You’re lucky you’re only bleeding enough to whine about. I’d gut you if you were anyone else, and I’m still considering it. If you wanna keep your intestines off the floor, I suggest you fuck off, get that cut sutured, and stay far away from me and my wife.” Freddy’s eyes are unfocused, and I slap his cheek lightly to get him to look at me. “You got that?”

He nods and stumbles away, his arm over his stomach like he’s gonna throw up. No one pays him any mind. I order two Long Island Iced Teas and join Josie at the table.

“I guess you saw that,” I say, setting a glass before her. “If you wanna play games with me, *zlotse*, you go right ahead. But remember—your jealousy is not the same as *my* jealousy. I’ll make people bleed and worse without a moment’s hesitation. You want that on your conscience?”

Josie throws back half the drink and grimaces. “You’re out of your damn mind. That guy came to talk to me, and I didn’t feel like flaunting my off-the-peg Vegas wedding ring. Not when you humiliated me by letting that girl flirt with you on the tour.”

“You think some pasty little girl could turn my head?” I take her hand. “No fucking way. Look what trouble I’m in over you, and you had to make me cut up a cop as well?” I grin at her shocked expression. “Come on. You cozied up to Freddy to get back at me, didn’t you? You knew what could happen. So don’t play innocent.”

“Alright.” Josie shows me her open palms. “Truce? We still haven’t picked a venue for this stupid wedding sequel. Just book anywhere. I’m done.”

I ignore her anger. “If you could choose anywhere in the world,” I ask, “where would you want to get married?”

Josie glances at me irritably, but her anger slowly dissipates. “I don’t know,” she admits, her shoulders slumping. “I never really imagined it. It felt impossible for someone like me to fall in love.”

“Same.” The word is out before I can stop myself. Those four letters convey more than I intended. I need to regain control. “So what harm’s a sham marriage anyway?”

Josie locks eyes with me, and I sense a deep sorrow lurking beneath the surface.

“Forget it,” I say softly. “This can wait. Let’s go home. I have a surprise for you.”



Josie

I don't know what to say to Sasha on the drive back. He's silent beside me, and the tension is suffocating.

Now he has me where he wants me, shackled to him and in his thrall. I've encountered men like him before, those who relish the power of making women desire them. His talk of being obsessed with me might just be a ploy to stroke my ego and make me feel special so I'll believe *he's* special. But even if it is a game, it doesn't change how I feel.

I steal a glance to my left, studying Sasha's profile. His dark hair is pulled back to reveal the shaved sides, his neck tattoo peeking above the collar of his black silk shirt. At a red light, he casually undoes his cuff buttons and rolls up his sleeves, his strong, inked fingers working deftly.

Those very hands were all over me last night. Those fingers touched and caressed my most intimate places.

I avert my eyes and return my gaze to his face. He has this habit of biting his lip, toying with the ring piercing through it. It makes me wonder if he's also lost in thoughts of last night.

Sasha parks the car outside his home and opens the door for me, reaching out to take my hand.

"I am trying, you know," he says.

I take his hand, climbing out of the car. "I know. Very trying indeed."

He smiles. "Come on, *zlotse*. You'll feel better in a minute."



Inside, there's a ruckus coming from upstairs. The other Kislevs are all gathered in the kitchen, with the sounds of clattering and laughter filling the air. We climb the stairs, and as we approach the kitchen door, Dulcie's voice rises above the commotion.

“Avel! There’s bruschetta on the table. You so much as touch that zabaglione, and I’ll—”

Sasha slaps the door open. “Do it, *brat*,” he says to his youngest brother. “Show her who’s boss!”

Dulcie turns around, pointing a playful finger at Sasha. “Keep your handsome beak out, *piccolo cuoco*!” She laughs, and Avel takes advantage of the distraction to dip a spoon into the custard, eliciting uproarious laughter from the table. Vlad shakes his head.

“I just wanted some supper,” he says with a chuckle. “Why is this house always a fucking circus?”

I throw Morgana a wave as Sasha closes the kitchen door behind us.

“We’re not joining them?” I ask.

“Not yet. I’ve got something to show you.”



At the door to our suite, Sasha steps behind me and puts his hand over my eyes.

“Woah. What are you doing?”

“Like I said—it’s a surprise.” I hear him opening the door, and he walks me forward. “You ready?”

“I don’t know. Is it something really awesome, like divorce papers?”

“Not *that* good.” He sounds genuinely wounded, and I feel bad for the quip. “But I hope you’ll like it anyway.”

He removes his hand, and I blink, looking around in shock. The cold, clean lines are gone, and the room is unrecognizable.

The dark wood floor is adorned with a stunning Persian rug beneath the king-size bed. The walls are painted a rich claret hue, and the new mahogany bed is covered in sumptuous fabrics, from a gold velvet throw to an opulent satin

bedspread. The closet has been replaced with a discreet built-in space with a sliding mirrored door, and a crystal chandelier sparkles overhead.

I release a long, slow exhale, and Sasha watches me closely. “Do you like it?” he asks. “You told me you hated this room, and I want you to understand I’m willing to compromise.”

I burst into laughter. “It’s perfect, Sasha. I can’t believe it. If I’d designed it myself, it couldn’t have been better. But how is it a compromise? You haven’t kept anything!”

He takes my hand, pressing his lips to my palm. “There’s nothing I want that comes at the expense of your happiness,” he says. “In our marriage, it works like this: My wife likes something. I do not. We compromise.” He gives a little bow. “And *moya zhen*a gets what she wants. That’s how it’s going to be, now and always.”

I run my hand over the luxurious bed linens. “Is this how it feels to be wealthy? You snap your fingers, and an army of decorators and interior designers descends upon you, transforming everything in record time?”

Sasha feigns confusion. “How else is it done?” he says with a mischievous smirk. “I wouldn’t know which way to hold a paintbrush, *zlotse*.”

As I continue to admire the room, I notice the intricate details. A vintage dresser with a gilt-edged mirror, a lamp on the nightstand with a base shaped like—

“Is that what I think it is?” I ask, drawing closer. It’s a mermaid sitting on a rock, cast in bronze. Beside it is an antique hardback copy of *The Little Mermaid* by Hans Christian Anderson.

Sasha removes the band from his hair, shaking it loose. “Ah, yeah. I remember seeing you reading a battered paperback copy once at your desk when you were eating lunch. Well-loved books tend to get dogeared, so I figured it was a favorite.”

Sasha’s brash arrogance seems to have deserted him. It’s as though he’s given himself away somehow. He absorbed every little detail about me—the things I like, my style, my quirks.

“It’s so generous of you to indulge me like this,” I say, my voice wobbling. “No one ever did something so kind for me, not since my mom.”

Sasha frowns and looks like he’s about to ask me a question, but he doesn’t. “Go and see the bathroom,” he says, nodding at the ensuite door.

The bathroom is no longer the sterile space it was. It’s still the same cream marble wet room, but now there’s a stunning claw-foot bathtub in a rosy copper, with matching fittings in the shower alcove. I look closer at the bathtub’s feet and notice they’re mermaids, like the figureheads on old ships.

“I wasn’t sure exactly what you’d want,” Sasha admits, “but when I thought about it, I realized I knew quite a bit about you.”

Apart from Morgana, no one has ever taken the time to truly get to know me. Not since my Mom, anyway. But Sasha paid attention, remembered it all, and used it to paint a picture of who I am. That means more to me than words can express. Tears well up in my eyes, and I sink to my knees, gripping the edge of the bathtub.

“Oh, Sasha,” I sob. “I’m so confused. Who *are* you? What is this?”

He’s on the floor beside me, his hand on my cheek. “I don’t know. I’m sorry. Is it too much?”

“It’s not just this.” Our eyes meet. “It’s *everything*. You’re making me believe in something, and that’s just a fast track to pain. Isn’t being your wife enough? You can make me do whatever you want. You don’t have to break my heart too.”

I don’t know why I’m saying this now. Other men told me I mattered, only to treat me like crap and discard me when they were done. But this feels different.

Sasha told me he hadn’t touched another woman since we met. His obsession knows no bounds. He’s killed and maimed for me, and I have no doubt he’d do it again. He risked his life and his family’s empire to claim me as his own, chased me when I ran, and now his touch feels like a brand, erasing every trace of my sordid past.

If this man is deceiving me, I'll be shattered. My heart will fracture like an earthquake, splitting my body in two.

I don't resist as Sasha pulls me onto his lap, his back against the bath. I straddle him and sigh as he puts a warm hand on my head, resting my cheek on his chest. Surprised to hear his heart pounding, I sit up again, my hands on his shoulders.

"What's the matter?" I whisper.

"Nothing." He slips a hand to the back of my neck, massaging it gently. "What could be wrong? It's right, *zlotse*. So, so right." He slides his arm around my waist and pulls me closer, drawing my lips to his.

I didn't expect him to kiss this way. He moves his mouth slowly, exploring with his tongue, and my core pulls at the thought of him doing the same to my pussy. I wrap my arms around his neck, my fingertips finding his shaved nape, and he moans into my mouth.

"Sasha," I whisper. "Don't touch me like this. Don't kiss me like I'm everything when you know you'll toss me aside when you've had enough."

"Never," he murmurs against my lips. I feel his hardness against me as he rocks my body, his hand slipping into the back of my jeans. "You're mine, and I'm yours. How can I prove I'm a fucking goner for you?"

A high-pitched sound, like a record scratch. Sasha breaks away from me and frowns, looking at the window. Outside, I hear his name being called. Another sharp thud, and I realize someone is throwing things at the house.

A brisk knock and Vlad's head appears round the bedroom door.

"Sorry to interrupt," he says, "but I think this one's on you."



Sasha

Josie disentangles herself from me and gets to her feet. She goes to the window and opens it wide, leaning out. A squeal of laughter emanates from the street below, followed by the sound of something breaking, and I know who's come around.

Like her father, Claudia is an impulsive, hot-headed firebrand, and I liked that about her superficially. But there's nothing beneath the surface except festering insecurity and a terrifying propensity to get over-attached. She's never gone quite this crazy before, but then again, I did say I'd marry her only to jilt her spectacularly in front of everyone she knows.

Right now, she looks like hell. She's wearing a dress so low in the front and short in the hemline that I've no idea what's holding it together. She's lost one of her feathered mules, her eye makeup is streaked, and even from this distance, I can tell she's more than drunk. There's a certain kind of wasted look in her eyes, and I can only hope she's not gonna overdose right there in the goddamn road.

"Claudia!" I shout out of the window. "Go home, for fuck's sake. This isn't helping."

She ignores me entirely and addresses Josie, who stands frozen beside me.

"How does it feel to be the slut of the moment?" she yells. "He only married you because you tried to get away. Sasha Kislev doesn't know how to love someone—he told me so right after he fucked me."

"That's bullshit," I say to Josie. "I never touched her."

"We dated!" Claudia is stumbling around in circles, her one high heel spinning her like a top. "It wasn't just an arranged marriage. He told me it was love. Obsession. He'd never wanted anyone more." She throws her arms in the air. "Now look at me!"

Josie hasn't spoken or moved. She's like a statue, and when I reach for her, she tenses, pulling away. Claudia is picking up our potted plants and smashing them on the ground.

“You’d better go talk to her,” Josie says, her voice like ice.

I pause, wanting to make it right, but I can’t. Not with my ex ranting like a lunatic in the street below.

I follow Vlad out of the room, closing the door behind me.



“You’re a fucking liar!”

Claudia can’t focus. Her eyes shift like she’s following a moving target, but I’m standing perfectly still.

“What have you taken?” I draw a little closer, keeping out of reach of her flailing hands.

Claudia is sobbing wretchedly. “You were mine, Sasha. I made a fool of myself for you. I waited, knowing you’d come around. Why did you marry a whore?”

I clench my fists at my sides. “Have you been on the junk again? Your father will kill you.”

“You want some?” She flutters her eyelashes at me in an appalling parody of flirtation. “I haven’t got any you can shoot up, but you can smoke with me if you want.”

“That’s all behind me, and you know it,” I say. “I haven’t used heroin in over three years. I thought you’d been clean for a long time, too.”

“When you dumped me the first time, it took everything I had not to get back on it,” Claudia sneers. “But when you broke off our engagement and made a laughing stock of me? I couldn’t see why I shouldn’t float away on a lovely junk cloud.”

There’s no way I can leave her like this. She’s drugged out of her mind and drunk. If Sal Tosca finds out I left his daughter on her own in this condition, our already-frosty relations will reach sub-zero levels.

“I’ll take you home to your father,” I say.

Claudia trips over nothing and falls ass-first into the puddle. I try to keep the pitying look off my face, but she cuts a pathetic figure, and I can't help but feel a twist of guilt. She takes my hand and gets unsteadily to her feet, falling into my arms, and I glance up at the window to see Josie turn away.

Shit. The timing couldn't be worse.

"Take me upstairs to your room, Sasha," Claudia croons. The sour scent of wine on her breath makes me nauseous. "Throw that bitch out and take me to bed."

"No, Claudia." I push her along to my car, which is parked nearby. "Home, or the hospital. Your call."

"Oh, fine," she spits. I dump her in the back seat. "I'm sure Papa will be thrilled to see you."



Sal Tosca's club is the kind of low-rent meat market my family refuses to patronize or own. My father thought prostitution to be a good little earner, but when he died, we got rid of the pimps and lowlives running the brothels, knowing most of them would pick up work with our rivals. Sure enough, there are a few familiar faces here.

None of Tosca's goons look pleased to see me, but I don't meet with any opposition because I'm practically carrying Claudia. Everyone knows Sal has me over a barrel as it is, and I'm here alone, so how much trouble can I cause?

A bodyguard frisks me before letting me into Tosca's private lounge. The man himself sits on a couch, a girl younger than his daughter on his lap. When he sees me, he stands up abruptly, sending the girl crashing to the ground. She scuttles away, leaving through a side door.

"The fuck have you done to her?" Tosca bellows. He clicks his fingers in front of his daughter's face. "Claudia!"

"She's fucked up, Sal." I sit Claudia on the couch beside her father, her head lolling as she slumps. "She's been drinking and smoking...well, you know." I

catch Tosca's expression and raise my palm. "Do not start with me. I had nothing to do with it. She showed up at my home, breaking shit and screaming in the street. You should keep a closer eye on her."

Tosca throws his daughter an angry glance. She's snoring gently, her hair stuck to her face.

"Well, she's back safely," he says. "I was gonna call on you, anyway. I have decided how you can repay your debt to me."

I sit in an armchair and accept a drink from a waitress in a ludicrous maid's outfit. "Good," I say. "I don't want this bullshit hanging over me. What do I have to do?"

Tosca raises his voice. "All you sluts, out. And you assholes." He waves at his men. "I need to speak to Sasha alone. Wait downstairs."

I'm all too aware I'm unarmed. The door closes behind the last man, and I wonder if this is a trap. *No*. If I were killed by Sal Tosca, the full force of the Kislev bratva and our many allies would be brought to bear. Besides, he's given his promise to the *komissiya*. He's got nothing to gain and everything to lose if he harms a hair on my head.

Tosca grabs a crystal carafe from the table and tops up my glass. "Do you remember my sister, Giulia?" he asks.

I nod.

"She's fucking around on my brother-in-law, Tomas, and he suspects it. He'll lose his damn mind if it comes out, and God knows what he'll do. My family will fall apart." Tosca knocks back his drink. "I found out who Giulia is sleeping with. He's nobody, but I don't want any of my guys to take him out. Anyone I trust enough to do it would be too close to the situation, and I need it to happen off my territory. I can't be seen to be involved."

It occurs to me that a man in Tosca's position ought to have people he can trust around him, but then again, this is a problem at the heart of his family.

"What's his name?" I ask.

“Larry. That’s all you need to know,” Tosca says. “I can get him onto your turf, but you’ll have to take him out fast. Giulia will think her idiot lover met with some misadventure, and my brother-in-law will be none the wiser. And *you*, Sasha Kislev,” he gives me a nod, “will be off the hook.”

This seems too easy.

I glance at the sleeping Claudia. “Okay, done,” I say. “But you gotta keep Claudia on the leash and away from me and Josie. Your daughter has already caused me a world of fucking problems, and I don’t need her coming around with more to hand out.”

“Fair enough.” Tosca gets to his feet, signaling that our parlay is coming to an end. “I’ll let the dust settle and see if I can’t negotiate another match for her.”

“Not just her, Sal. This has to be the end of it. I’m having a second wedding soon, and after that, I want you to meet with Igor and me and tell him this debt is settled.”

“Fine.” Tosca extends his arm to me. “Do this for me, keep it to yourself, and we’ll call it quits.”

I stand and shake his hand. It’s clammy, and I resist the urge to wipe my palm on my pants’ leg. “You’ll let me know when to make my move?”

“Absolutely. *Grazie*, Alexandr Sergeyev Kislev.”

I nod. “*Prego. Buonasera*, Don Tosca.”



One hour earlier...

Josie

I turn away from the window, hot tears burning my skin as my eyes spill over.

Sasha told me Claudia was crazy. Obsessed with him. But he never mentioned that they'd been together. Why would he keep that part to himself?

Because she's telling the truth. The thought comes unbidden but insistent, and I can't shake it loose. Did Sasha say all the same things to Claudia? Did he let her believe she mattered so he could manipulate her into loving him? She seemed unhinged, throwing things and screaming, but love is savage sometimes.

Maybe she wasn't crazy until *he* came along and messed her up. I sure as hell can empathize if so.

Another knock at the door makes me jump, but it's just Morgana.

"Hey. I saw what happened. Are you alright?"

"What did you see?" I sniff. "The part where my husband ran off to rescue his ex? Or when she fell into his arms, and he valiantly carried her off to his car?" My voice rises as I lose my composure. "He's fucking with me, isn't he? Where did he go?"

"Shhh." Morgana sits on the bed and pats the coverlet. "Sasha is crazy about you. He'll be back soon with an explanation. Come and sit down. Get yourself together."

I sit beside her and drop my head onto her shoulder. "Why do men only ever want to own me? Vlad treats you like the most precious thing on Earth, but Sasha says whatever he has to say to get what he wants."

“You sure?” Morgana puts her arm around me and gives me a squeeze. “If Vladi can learn to love, so can Sasha.”

“Yeah. But he has to *want* to. And why would he change? A man like him will not abandon his carefree lifestyle to commit to someone like me.”

“And why not?”

I sit up straight. “He wants to keep me like a pet. Something to spoil and show off, but that’s all.”

Morgana frowns. “That’s what Marc would have done. And you were willing to settle for that. So what’s different now?”

The difference is I’m falling for Sasha like I’ve been kicked out of a plane at thirty thousand feet: too fast, too far, and with nothing to look forward to but a grim and sudden end.

Even if I can hold his attention for a while, it won’t be long before his true nature wins out, and I’ll be forced to sit by like a good bratva wife and pretend not to notice his affairs. But if I’m dumb enough to love him? It’ll be *agony*.

I’d rather have endured a loveless lifetime with Marc than one day of loving Sasha. At least with Marc, I longed for nothing and aspired to even less. Now, my heart is alive to possibilities even as I try to bludgeon it into submission.

“Do you remember me telling you about my mom’s New York Public Library job?”

“Her parole work placement?” Morgana smiles. “Yeah, of course.”

“She was a cleaner there for years.” I pick up a cushion and hug it to my chest. “We were dirt poor, but they were good times. I spent hours in that library—Mom didn’t want me to be home alone because our neighborhood was sketchy. The place would be silent and empty, and I’d have all the time in the world to read.” I sigh. “It was a safe place for me because there were a million stories to escape into, and my mom was there too. I used to read romantic tales of knights and princesses and villainous lords.”

Morgana smiles tenderly. “I guess the real world let you down in a big way.”

My vision blurs as the tears come again. “Yeah. It all gets wrapped up neatly in stories, doesn’t it? It’s easy for the princess. All she has to do is sit around and wait to be rescued by her one true love. Not gonna happen for me.”

Morgana tilts her head, considering my point. “Well, Sasha *did* rescue you. Sort of.”

“Awesome,” I say. “So if I can charm animals into doing chores, I’ll know I’m onto a winner.”

“This is New York City,” Morgana says. “You gonna sing sweetly to the rats and get them to make you a ballgown?”

I have to laugh. Morgana and Vladi made it, and I’ve never seen two people more in love. Maybe there’s hope for Sasha and me yet, but the cold feeling in the pit of my stomach refuses to dissipate.

“I’m gonna go lie down,” Morgana says, easing to her feet. Her bump threatens to unbalance her, and I catch her hand. “Thanks,” she says. “You gonna be okay?”

“Sure. Go rest. I’ll be fine.”



I sit for a long time after Morgana leaves, staring into space. Now that I started thinking about my mom, it’s like she’s lodged in my brain, and I can’t think about anything except those times. The good, rough times before it all went wrong.

Poverty stalks my nightmares. I’m so afraid of having nothing that I put myself in dangerous situations to avoid it, just like Mom did. I wish I’d had the chance to tell her she was all I needed.

In her effort to drag us off the breadline, she gambled with our lives and lost hers. Mine was forever marred, and the vultures didn’t take long to close in once I was alone in the world.

I know Sasha lost his mother. But he had his family's wealth and prestige to fall back on. He's never tasted the metallic tang of desperation on his tongue. He doesn't know what it is to feel like a reject, a loser, unloved, surplus to requirements.

A desire strikes me for a strong drink, and I go to the kitchen. I find Dulcie humming to herself as she cleans the counters.

"Ah, hello!" she trills. "Are you hungry, *bella*? What do you need?"

"I would love a glass of wine."

"Sit, sit!" She ushers me to the table and pulls out a chair. "I will get you a smooth Pinot Noir. No good you rolling around the house after one glass." She gives me a motherly pat on the shoulder, and I feel like crying again. "No food? I expect Sasha will cook for you when he gets home."

I spin in my seat and stare at her as she pours the wine. "What? He cooks?"

"*Certamente*. His mother, Stefania, taught him when he was a young boy. It was their favorite thing to do together."

I smile at the thought of Sasha as a child, standing on a stool as he mixed ingredients. The image is at odds with the cold enforcer he grew up to be.

"Hard to picture it?" Dulcie asks as though reading my mind. "Sasha was the second son, and his father Sergey considered him a spare in case something happened to Vladi. In fact, when Sergey was unhappy with Vladi, he would tell him to beat Sasha, and if he refused, Sergey would beat them both. Vlad never hit as hard as his father, so he had to do it. He didn't want to see Sasha hurt more than he had to be."

"That's terrible," I say, appalled. "Why would their father do that?"

She hands me the wine. "Sergey wanted his sons to hate each other, but they did not. Vlad and Sasha are close. But Sasha always feels he has something to prove, not to his brother but to his father. Sergey may be dead, but that feeling is still very much alive." She sits opposite me. "Both boys were devastated when their mother Stefania died, but Sasha buried his grief. I think he wanted to hide from it, and unlike Vlad, his father expected little from him. Sasha didn't have Vladi's discipline, and he spent too much time

sleeping around and taking it easy.”

I think about Sasha’s bed-hopping reputation and wonder: does he protect his heart because he’s afraid to give it away? When I lost my mother, I froze inside, never caring enough about myself to strive for anything. I just tried to survive, to get by. Is Sasha the same, in his own way?

Dulcie’s soft eyes wrinkle at the corners, and she looks pained. “I guess that’s why Sasha got into—” She stops and meets my eyes. “Never mind. He will tell you in his own time if he wants to.”

I think about wheedling her but decide against it. “If he can cook, why do you do so much of it?”

“He’s busy. And the family is in and out, hungry at all hours.” She laughs heartily. “He’d never leave the kitchen; I sure don’t. Nowadays, he only cooks for Signora G.”

Another woman? I bristle, and Dulcie sees my irritation. “No, *bella*. Signora G was his Mama’s friend. She’s old and not very well these days, so he visits her and makes sure she eats.”

I’m astonished, and I’m sure it shows on my face. My husband is a killer. A man with a brutal temper and a hair-trigger reaction to anyone showing me disrespect—a reaction that usually leads to bloodshed. But he remembered so much about me, redecorated his bedroom to suit my taste, and kissed me so tenderly I almost melted into a puddle at his feet. And now I find out he’s a carer for a little old lady and takes her homemade meals every day?

“I don’t know him at all, do I?” I ask.

Dulcie smiles as she gets to her feet. “Maybe not. But encourage Sasha to open up to you, and you might just find that under the brash exterior beats the heart of a lover, not just a fighter. He’s tough, Josie, tougher than you know, but he needs a woman like you.”



Sasha

When I return to the house, I find Arman in the foyer, picking out notes on the piano. He looks drawn and preoccupied, his dark eyes dull.

Arman isn't an official Kislev, but he might as well be. His father was killed many years ago, and the old man was loyal to our family, so Papa took Arman in. Although he wasn't a kid anymore, he needed direction, and my father's guardianship probably saved his life.

He's our go-to guy for gathering intel, and he's proven himself to be an exceptional bodyguard. In recent months, he's been supervising Lilyana as she gets used to her burgeoning independence. My little sister has always been vulnerable, but she's come a long way, gaining confidence under Arman's watchful eye.

"What gives?" I ask. Arman ignores me, and I notice the half-empty bottle of vodka on the side table. "You're hitting the bottle hard, *priyatel*'. Alone. It's not a good sign."

Arman closes the piano with a sigh. "I should have learned to play this fucking thing," he says. "I tried, but I was never any good."

I'm not sure how to respond, so I change the subject. "Is Vlad around?"

"He took Morgana out to a restaurant. She wanted sushi, and you know how he is. He didn't need telling twice." He sighs heavily and picks up his glass. "They took Lilyana with them. She's meeting a friend from Juilliard for drinks."

"I'm glad she's getting out," I say. "She needs more than just her family. She's lived far too sheltered a life." Arman knocks back his drink, reaching for the bottle. I pick it up, shaking my head. "Enough. You look fuckawful already."

"D'you think Lili should be hanging out with guys, though?" Arman asks. "I don't. I want her home, and I can't fucking relax until her asshole buddy Sebastian returns her safely."

There's a vitriol in his voice that I recognize. Somewhere beneath Arman's protectiveness is a streak of true jealousy.

"You got something on your mind?" I fix him with a stare, but he slides his eyes away, and I know he's hiding something. "Because we can talk about it if you want. It'd be better than fucking up your liver."

"Are you really the person to be giving that lecture?"

He turns to look at me, and I see it in his face; he's not gonna give me anything. If I want to know what's eating him, I'll be waiting a long time.

"What did you do with Miss Suddenly-Single White Female?" Arman gets to his feet and crosses the floor, dumping himself on a couch.

"I took her to her father." I put the bottle on the piano and join him. "He's not best pleased with her *or* me. On the other hand, he gave me a job, so once that's out of the way, our truce will be officially back in place. Maybe then I can get on with my life."

"You should have thrown a fuck into Claudia," Arman says. "Might have settled her down. Do you think she'll let this slide because her daddy said so?"

"She doesn't have much of a choice," I reply. "Tosca may be enjoying flexing his muscles, but he doesn't have the power to cause significant problems, even if he wanted to wage war over her. He's just throwing his weight around and has the *komissiya* on his side, so he's making the most of having a hold over us."

"Over *you*." Arman raises an eyebrow. "It's not our *bratva*'s business."

"Just as well. Something about it bothers me."

I've been thinking about this ever since I left Tosca's club. Kill some nobody and keep it on the down-low? Is that all he wants? Tosca has a golden opportunity here, and he's squandering it on an errand anyone could do. He said he doesn't trust anyone with the job, but I'm unsure. A nagging sense of doubt keeps drawing attention to itself, like an itch in the center of my head.

“Well, you could discuss it with Vlad,” Arman says. He stands and stretches. “But if we start asking questions, someone will guess we know about it, and you’ll have broken the terms of the honor debt. On the other hand, once it’s done, Tosca will have no leverage.” He grins. “So you’ll be finally able to tell the prick to go to hell, and the *komissiya* will have nothing to say.”

He’s absolutely right. All I have to do is get this bullshit errand out of the way, and then I can work out what to do about Josie. She’ll be safe, but if she doesn’t want to stay married to me...fuck knows. I’ll figure that out if we get to it.

“You make a good point, *brat*,” I say. “Why make a bigger deal out of it? I’ll just get it done, and then we can put Tosca back where he belongs—at the bottom of the pile.”

“If you wanna be on top of Sal Tosca, be my guest,” Arman laughs. He heads for the basement stairs. “I’m gonna go to work on the punchbag and sweat out some of this vodka.”

I nod. “Good idea. Don’t land your famous left hook on Lili’s date when they arrive, though.”

Arman’s smile drops off his face, and he flips me off. “Thanks for the fucking reminder,” he says. “Go on, get out of here.”



I head into the kitchen and find a bottle of red open on the counter. I pour a large glass and breathe in the aroma.

Jealousy, drama, mixed signals, tension, intimacy, and anger. Just like a real marriage.

Josie and I were getting close when Claudia ruined everything, and I left without explaining. Josie is more than likely furious, and I don’t blame her.

I could have fucked Claudia in the car or anywhere. I could have just denied it; no one would have believed her, and she was throwing herself at me. But the thought never crossed my mind for a second.

Josie is doing everything she can to resist me, while Claudia is making it all too easy. Clearly, there's more to this than my ego. If all I wanted was a woman's all-encompassing desire, I could have it from Claudia or someone else. Josie is not indifferent to me—that much is obvious—but she's holding back and letting me suffer.

I don't just want my wife's body. I want her heart, mind, spirit, and soul. If this is how Claudia feels about me, I pity her.

I can't take this anymore. Josie is mine, and I will not allow her to use my obsession to control me. When she's at my feet, begging me to possess her, she will know who's in charge.



Josie

I know he's there.

The door opened and closed a few minutes ago, but since then, all has been quiet. The water is warm and comforting, and the bubbles are piled high around me. My hair is in a crown braid, as I don't feel like washing it, but it's good to get my body clean. I don't know how long I can stay in the bath—my fingers are already pruning—but the longer I can put off confronting Sasha, the better.

I felt cheap and dirty, more so than when Sasha touched my body during the night. He tainted me deeper this time by putting his grasping hands on my heart.

It sickens me to think his obsessive attention and hotly whispered words are part of his playbook. Did he make Claudia Tosca feel this way, too? No wonder she's acting out. I'd like to believe I wouldn't debase myself by shouting at a man in the street, but then again, I'm in uncharted territory. I never thought a man as beautiful and brutal as Sasha would be the one to force me to feel something I thought I'd never feel.

A small shelf near the tub, meant for a sponge or shampoo bottle, now holds my wine glass instead. Sasha enters the bathroom just as I'm about to take a sip.

"Get out." I whip my head to him and give him my most scathing look. "If you need to wash Claudia away, you can wait your turn."

Sasha halts and stares at me, paying no heed to my anger. "Are you hungry?" he finally asks.

"Yes, I'm starving," I reply, sinking lower into the water to hide my body from his penetrating gaze. "Did you work up an appetite while you were with her?"

He sits on the floor and leans against the bathtub, a drink in his hand. A heavy sigh escapes his lips before he speaks.

“I never slept with Claudia Tosca,” he says. “I don’t know why I didn’t tell you about our past. At the time, I didn’t think it mattered. Since I met you, no one else has captured my attention.”

“She said otherwise. Why did you break up?”

Irritation puts a sharp edge on his words. “You’ve seen what she’s like. Why do you think? Incompatible star signs? Okay,” he turns around, “I’m a Capricorn, and she’s an insufferable, unhinged addict. Our auras weren’t in harmony. Is that enough for you?”

“Look at me, Sasha,” I demand, and he obliges, his piercing eyes filled with torment. “You left me here and drove off into the night with a drunk woman. A woman who desires you deeply and who you were supposed to marry. What did you expect me to think?”

Sasha finishes his drink in one swift motion. Steam from the bath has made his hair damp, and his shirt is unbuttoned at the neck, a glistening sheen of perspiration on his skin.

Of course Claudia can’t get over him. Can *I*? Should I even try?

“I wanted to take you to dinner tonight,” he says suddenly, “but it’s getting kinda late. Will you do me the honor of accompanying me on a date to the kitchen? I’ll fix us some cereal or something.”

I smile. “Actually, husband, Dulcie exposed your secret. I know you can cook. You owe me, so I expect a proper meal.”

He nods. “Your wish is my command. But, seriously, *zlotse*, nothing happened tonight.” He runs his finger along my forearm, sending shivers down my spine. “I took Claudia to her father, and that was it. All I wanted was to get back to you.”

I believe him. I’m looking into the eyes of a man who’s falling, or I’m a delusional fool, but my scorn has faded away. “Okay. But you gotta prove it in the kitchen.”

Sasha gets to his feet. “I’ll pick out something for you to wear. May as well make an occasion of it.”

“You can be quite controlling at times,” I say. “Did you know that?”

He throws me a look over his shoulder. “*Quite? And only at times?* I need to up my game.”



When I emerge, Sasha is wearing smart suit pants and a crisp white shirt, his hair pulled back from his face. He sits in the armchair near the window, his ankle crossed over his knee, looking like the hottest thing I ever saw.

“Your dress is on the bed,” he says.

I pick it up and gasp. It’s this season’s Valentino, a satin midi dress in midnight blue with a bustier and a gathered skirt. I turn it over in my hands, enjoying the feel of it. Also on the bed is a shoe box marked ‘Louboutin.’

“I ordered these for you,” Sasha says. “They should fit; I looked through your clothes and checked the labels for the correct size. I was gonna save them for Christmas, but why make you wait? You can have whatever you want, anytime.”

“Marc bought me clothes too,” I say. Sasha’s expression darkens, and I finish my thought. “But he always bought them a size too small. He didn’t want me to be comfortable in case I got complacent about my diet.”

Sasha scowls. “I’ll never regret killing him. From now on, any man who offends you will be dealt with by me personally.” He taps his wrist. “Come on now, *moya zhená*. Tick-tock.”

I consider taking the outfit into the bathroom to change, but I decide to ignore Sasha’s presence and carry on as I would if he wasn’t there. I turn my back and retrieve some underwear from the dresser drawer, then shuck off my robe.

Sasha’s sharp intake of breath is gratifying to hear. I slip quickly into my panties, slide my thigh-highs over my legs, and wriggle into the dress, arranging my breasts in the bustier. I don’t glance at him once.

As I reach for the zipper, I hear his voice, thick with lust.

“Come here. Bring the shoes.”

Sasha is still in the chair, and I stand before him, unsure what will happen next. He stares at me intently, his hands twitching as he rests them on his knees.

“Turn around.”

I do as I’m bid, and he grabs my waist, pulling me onto his lap. I yelp in shock and drop the shoes. His palm is warm as he slips it over my back, his other hand smoothing the satin on my thigh. He finds the zipper and slides it slowly up, settling his hand on the back of my neck.

“Now stand,” he murmurs. “Pick up your shoes and give them to me.”

I don’t want to move. I feel his hardness against me, and I can’t resist a wiggle of my hips. He responds with a deep, throaty growl and pushes me onto my feet.

“Do what I tell you. Shoes.”

I retrieve my heels from the floor and turn to face Sasha. His gray eyes pierce me intensely, and I realize he’s barely keeping it together. Passion is mixed with anger, and I see frustration there, too, but it’s not directed at me. It’s as though he doesn’t dare break through—he’s afraid he’ll hurt me if he gives in to his desire.

He sits back and flexes his jaw, but he doesn’t smile. All at once, I see the man whose reputation is enough to make grown men cower. He’s built from raw energy and brute strength, with hands capable of terrible things. I shouldn’t long to feel those same hands caressing me again, but the frisson of fear makes me want him all the more.

Sasha spreads his legs and pats his right thigh with his palm. I don’t understand for a moment, and he reaches for me, taking the shoes and putting them in his lap. He sits back and taps his thigh again. I lift my right foot in the air, and he meets it, resting it on his palm. He guides my foot onto his leg, cradling my calf gently as he slides the heeled sandal into place.

“This is where I belong,” he says. He brushes my skin with his knuckles, and I feel a jolt of electric sensation pulse through me. “I’m a powerful man, and

I'll never let you forget it. But you've stolen my heart, and it fucking scares me." He lifts my foot to his lips and kisses it. "Only a fool would fail to worship you as you deserve, *zlotse*. And I'm nobody's fool except yours."

I'm in awe. It's more than just an intimate act; it's a display of devotion. Although there's no doubt that Sasha is in charge, he's at my service. I feel like royalty, worshiped by a man whose reputation commands fear. Sasha Kislev, who could have anyone he wanted, is delicately fastening the ankle strap on a pair of Louboutins he purchased for me. Does he genuinely believe I'm worth it?

He releases my foot, and I offer him the other. His hands feel exquisite against my skin, and I'm on the brink of straddling him and giving in to the longing that courses through me. But before I can move, he's on his feet, heading for the door.

"I want you," he says, "but you told me you're hungry, so first, you must eat. Considering what I have planned for you, you'll need to keep your strength up."



Sasha

“So, why gnocchi?” I ask as I drop the little dumplings into boiling water.

Josie leans against the kitchen table, watching me. I turn and catch her eye, seeing the ambivalence in her.

She thinks I’m bad news, and why wouldn’t she? It’s true. But I know she wants me. She wants me like people in hell want ice water, and there’s nothing she can do about it.

Josie sighs. “Gnocchi reminds me of my mother.”

Her tone does little to hide the undercurrent of sorrow. I give her my back, hoping to make it easier for her to talk.

“How so?” I ask.

“She would save her smallest coins in a tin, sometimes for weeks, and then the day would come. We’d go to the Italian restaurant around the corner and order a portion of gnocchi with marinara sauce to share. It only ran to a few dollars, but it was still expensive to us.”

I feel a sharp jab of recollection. Mama and I used to share Italian food we cooked ourselves. It was our time, something just for us. But we weren’t poor, of course.

I don’t know anything about Josie’s family. Morgana always said it wasn’t her business to disclose personal information about her dearest friend. Now, as Josie chokes back a sob, I want to reach into her bruised soul and soothe her. I don’t even know how to do that, but God knows I want to try.

Josie sniffs and continues. “Mom knew it was my favorite treat, so we’d share it, but she always said she wasn’t hungry, so I wouldn’t feel bad about eating it all.”

I taste the sauce. The fresh garlic hits my tongue, and I’m happy. Just the right balance.

“Sounds to me like your mom was a good person,” I say as I drain the water from the gnocchi. “Where is she now?”

“Dead.”

I put the saucepan down and face her. “I’m so sorry. What happened?”

She meets my eyes. “I never told anyone the whole truth, Sasha. If I tell you now, you’ll know who I am and what I come from.” She wraps her arms around her body defensively. “If you just wanna fuck me, fine. I can handle that. But don’t pick up my broken pieces just so you dash them to the ground again.”

The silence isn’t uncomfortable. Josie knows what happened to my mother, but not how I feel about it. Something passes unspoken between us—a bargain.

Emotional wounds? Sure. I got ’em. You show me yours, and I’ll show you mine.

“Okay, so you don’t trust me,” I say. “But I wanna understand you better, Josie. If you want some collateral, fine. What do you wanna know?”

“Tell me about your Mama.” Josie sets down her glass and takes the saucepan from me, spooning the gnocchi and sauce into two pasta dishes. “I know a little from Morgana, but I wanna hear it from you.”

I rarely talk about my mother. Even Vlad can’t draw me on the subject—he and I experienced her differently. Mama and Vlad had something special, and I could never burden him with the truth about how that made me feel.

“If I let you see my soul, you have to do the same.” I pick up a dish and sit at the table. “Marriage is nothing compared to that kind of trust, but if that’s what it takes to get you to drop your guard and open up to me, so be it.”

Josie stares at me for a long moment, then sits opposite me, her food in front of her. She nods.

“So my mother Stefania was forced to marry my father, and he was a piece of shit. Raped her, mistreated her. You know this, right?”

“I know.” She eats a piece of gnocchi, nodding as she does so. “This tastes so good, Sasha. So damn good.”

I love giving her pleasure. It sure as hell won't be the last time.

“So Vlad was the kid your parents focused on,” she continues. “How old was Stefania when she had the twins?”

“Too old.” I take a bite and chew slowly, gathering my thoughts. “Mama was deeply attached to Vlad. He saved her life by giving her something to love and live for. But he was groomed for leadership, not me. I was the second son, the understudy if you will. My father barely noticed I existed, except as a tool to coach Vlad in some lesson he thought he needed.”

Josie furrows her brow. “Dulcie told me Vlad used to beat you instead of letting your father do it. That can't have been easy to take.”

I close my eyes. I can see my brother's face, torn with regret and fear as he punched me again and again, knowing if he didn't, our father would leave us both bruised and bleeding. He thought he was teaching Vlad to be ruthless, but my brother and I grew close in our shared trauma. This is why I don't hate Vlad, even though—

“Mama loved Vlad more than she loved me.”

I look at Josie. She's frozen, her fork halfway to her mouth.

“How can you know that?” she asks. “She used to cook with you, didn't she? It was your special time, the thing you shared.”

Dulcie and her stories. The Kislev bratva's power and might doesn't stop our beloved housekeeper from flapping her trap, but luckily, she never talks about our business. She's a gossip, but she keeps it in the family, and it's the only reason she's lasted so long in our employment.

“Yeah.” I pour some wine and take a large gulp. “God, I loved it. A couple of hours a week, often a Sunday afternoon. Just her and me. When I got older, I didn't wanna hang out with her. Got too busy running the streets, pretending to be a big man.”

She smiles. “You? Surely not.”

I shrug at her amusement. “I started young, so what? We all did. It’s just the life. But Mama died, and I had never told her how much she meant to me. She didn’t love me the same, and I know it, but she was still the only safe place in my world.”

I’m lost in my memories, and for a moment, the room isn’t there at all. Josie reaches for me, settling her hand over mine.

“I felt the same about my mother,” she says. “My father promised her the Earth, but within weeks of her moving in with him, he was already whoring her out. He got her hooked on heroin, and she was a mess.”

It takes all my self-control not to tense up. I force myself to keep a neutral expression, but klaxons are howling in my head.

I can’t tell her everything. She’ll despise me for it.



Sasha

Josie talks as though every word is physically painful. It's hard to listen to. I knew she was tough, but I never knew how strong she had to be.

"My mom found out she was pregnant. She couldn't be sure who the father was, but she had to escape. Her so-called boyfriend would claim me as his, regardless of the circumstances, and Mom was scared for our lives."

She eats a little, and I see the conflict in her. She doesn't want to tell me more, but I want to possess her secrets because they are part of her. I want to hear her thoughts, feelings, hurts, and dreams, and I refuse to let her keep them to herself.

"Go on, *zlotse*." I lean forward, fixing my eyes on hers. "Tell me."

Josie holds my gaze. "She attacked a client and got arrested, knowing she'd be safer in jail. My father fled the city to avoid getting caught up in it all. I was born in prison and immediately taken to live in an orphanage, but I always visited my mom. The nuns would bring me three times a week. Mom got in with the screws to earn extra visits, so the other inmates beat her up a lot, but it was worth it to her. She got out when I was five and came to get me straight away."

I finish my food and push the dish aside. "Jesus," I say. "That's some commitment. Did she get clean?"

Josie smiles, sadness creeping at the edges. "She sure did. Got a job at the New York library as a cleaner, I went to school, and we lived in a crappy apartment with windows that didn't open. We got by for a while that way."

I feel like an asshole. I take my opulent lifestyle for granted and always have. Vlad and I had private tutors as kids, and when we were old enough, we trained in gunmanship and other skills, as is customary for prominent bratva sons. We never lacked any material things. If we wanted something, it would appear like magic.

"Your mother loved you, *moya zhena*. That's wonderful." I stand and clear the dishes away, piling them beside the basin. "Something went wrong

though, didn't it?"

Josie has her back to me, and I see her shoulders sag. She turns in her seat.

"I was thirteen when it happened. I didn't piece it all together until later." She rubs her face with her palm. "Mom ran into an old acquaintance who made her a proposition. She saw a way to get us out of poverty, but it was a big risk. She decided to take the chance, and it seemed to work for a while. Then I came home one day and found her."

I frown. "Found her? Does that mean what I think it means?"

"Yeah." Josie's voice wavers. "Mom had been dealing for quite a while, stockpiling her cut to put a downpayment on a better place for us. She wanted me to have better clothes, shoes without holes, and friends instead of bullies. But it got too much, and she decided to shoot up. Just a little to get her through the day."

I'm shaking. I understand exactly how her mom felt. When I was first getting sober, the same feeling used to hit me at least twenty times a day—the urge to cook up a dose, find a vein, and let liquid oblivion carry me far from everything that ever hurt me.

"I tried to wake her up." Josie's cheeks shine with tears, but she doesn't notice. "I wiped her face with a wet cloth, shook her, shouted, cried. The ambulance came, but no one seemed to care much. I sat alone at the hospital for hours until someone asked what I was doing there. Eventually, a social worker came and took me away. I stayed at a children's home, and it was two weeks before anyone bothered to tell me that my mom was dead. "

My heart aches. I didn't know my wife and I had wounds in common. She, too, lost her mother in horrible circumstances, but unlike me, she was still a child when it happened. And then she was alone in the world, afraid and unloved. What the fuck do I know about suffering?

"I was placed with a foster family again," Josie says, "but a different one. Carl and Janine Ellis. They had tons of kids like me and did it for the money, but it was okay at first." She smiles sadly. "I liked the other kids. I was older, so the Ellis's made me look after them, but I didn't mind. I tried to teach them to read, and we'd get books out of the library. I guess it made me feel

close to Mom, to be reading again and helping others get lost in stories.”

“Is that something you’d like to do again?” I ask. “You said you aspired to do more than work for Kislev Enterprises.”

Josie nods. “I don’t know. I thought it’d be nice to do the same for kids in care, like as a charity or whatever.” Her tone grows bitter. “Marc thought it was weird, caring whether unloved children could find joy in reading, but he didn’t care about anyone who wasn’t useful to him.”

She’s playing it down, but some of the brightness has returned to her eyes, and I realize this notion has sustained her through her darkest moments. It’s as though she’s suddenly embarrassed, and she shakes her head as though to clear the thought.

“Anyway,” she continues. “Then the Ellis’s got into a new hobby, and people started coming around. Many visitors came and went, taking the kids to ‘parties.’ I guess it was a nice little earner.”

“I’m not gonna ask what happened, but I can guess. You went too?”

She drops her head. “Yep. It was as bad as you’d think. One kid killed herself, but the CPS worker hushed it all up. I fell in with an older guy and ran away to live with him. Like my mother before me, I believed he’d take care of me. Keep me safe. I went through the cycle a few more times and accepted my fate. The apple didn’t fall far from the tree. But I never touched any drugs.”

I want to find the Ellis’s. I want the names of every man who paid for Josie. Every scumbag cunt who attended the parties where children were passed around for the amusement of sick perverts. If I could, I’d throttle the life out of each of them and make them look my wife in the eye as they faded away.

But there’s one person at the top of my list, and I’ll make it my life’s work to put a name where there’s nothing more than a shadow.

“Josie, I’ll find out who lured your mom back to drugs. If they’re still alive, they won’t be for long.”

She smiles, but she doesn’t believe me. She doesn’t understand why I’d go to the ends of the Earth for her because she has this idea that she’s defective.

Predestined to be property, chattel. Used and abused because it's all she knows. And I, prick that I am, did everything in my power to confirm her belief.

Self-loathing is my constant companion, and I've worked hard to suppress it so it doesn't eat me alive. But I never hated myself more than I do right now.

I reach for Josie and pull her to her feet, wrapping my arms around her. She doesn't resist, burying her face in my chest. She looks up at me, her beautiful eyes shimmering, and I'm undone.

"Moya zhen." I drop my lips to hers, tasting the salt of her tears. "My wife. My everything. All you have to do is say my name, and the world stops turning."

Josie clutches at my back and molds her body to mine as I kiss her again. "Nothing, and no one matters like you do," I murmur. "Don't you feel it in my kisses? In my touch?"

I cup her ass and pick her up. She wraps her legs around my waist, her hands in my hair. "I do," she replies, her breath hot beside my ear. "I want to believe you, Sasha."

"So come upstairs," I say, "and let me convince you."



Josie

Sasha opens the bedroom door, and I dart inside and into the bathroom, closing the door behind me.

My heart is pounding as though trying to hammer its way out of my chest. I need a moment to compose myself.

I told Sasha my deepest hurts, and he listened. He has something I never gave any man—a way to truly hurt me. He's the keeper of my heart's fragile secrets. Can I rely on him not to abuse my trust?

The only power I have over Sasha is his burning desire. Once he gets what he wants, will the fire be quenched? Will he cast me aside, just as I fear he will? I'm still not sure about Claudia. Maybe I'm destined to be like her, confused and hurt by Sasha's lies, yet cursed to be in love with him?

I stare in the mirror and take a deep breath, steadying myself. This is happening. I'm powerless to resist. The consequences will come to bear, but I *gotta* have him, even if it's only once.

Sasha opens the bathroom door and stands behind me. I begin to turn around, but he puts a hand on my hip, holding me still.

"Stay there." He pulls the pins from my braid and rakes his fingers, tumbling my hair onto my shoulders. "You do what I say now; I promise you won't regret it."

I sigh as he sweeps my hair over one shoulder, dropping his lips to the hollow of my throat. He tugs my hair gently, pulling my head to one side and exposing my tender neck to his kisses. His mouth is hot on my skin, and framed by the Baroque gilt border of the mirror's edge, he looks like a seductive vampire. A monster from a fever dream, an erotic, desperate fantasy of sex, death, and lust all rolled into one.

Sasha's free hand finds my zipper, sliding it down to the small of my back. He tugs at the satin, rolling it down to my hips. My breasts catch a chill as they are exposed to the air, my nipples puckering, and Sasha gives a low moan, covering them with his palms. I close my eyes and drop my head

against his shoulder as he teases my sensitive nipples between his fingers and thumbs.

“That’s my good girl,” he whispers. “You want me, don’t you? Your body has been calling to me even as you tried to resist.”

He’s right, of course. My pussy is going crazy, twitching and flooding as his teasing sends bolts of sensation to my core. His hardness is pressed against my ass, and I’m so wet and ready for him it’s almost embarrassing. Despite his size, he could bury himself inside me to the hilt with one firm thrust.

“Shut up,” I say. “You win, okay? You always do, one way or another. Do what you will. I want it all.”

He growls and bites my throat. “Expect no finesse, *zlotse*. I’ve waited too long for this.” He drags my dress down my thighs, taking my panties with it, and I’m naked except for my thigh-highs and heels. “Put your leg up here so I can get to you.”

He puts a hand under my right knee and lifts it, resting it on the basin. I put my hands on the tile wall, my face close to the mirror. In the reflection, I see Sasha rapidly shed his clothes, the heat radiating from his body. He steps close again, and his cock nudges my ass, as hot as a firebrand.

“Fuck, you’re juicy,” he says, running his fingertips over my swollen pussy lips. I yelp at his touch, and he laughs, running his palm up my spine. He winds my hair into a rope, wrapping it around his hand and pulling my head back.

“Look at yourself,” he murmurs. His other hand is still on my pussy, his fingertips seeking out my clit. “You look slutty as hell. Heavy eyelids, flushed cheeks, bitten lips. Panting.” He nudges my clit, rolling it gently, and I moan, my breath fogging the mirror. “Glorious,” he says, slipping his cock between my damp inner thighs. “Better than I imagined, even. You’re a beautiful mess, Josie. Tell me you want me inside you.”

His words are killing me. Who knew he had such a filthy mouth? I’ve heard men say similar things, but not like this. Sasha sounds hypnotized, as though he’s drunk on desire.

“Of course I want you inside me,” I gasp. “Just fuck me, Sasha. I can’t wait anymore!”

Sasha’s piercing catches my clit as he rubs the smooth head of his cock against me. He groans and grabs his shaft, moving into position and rocking his hips, coating the tip of him with my wetness. The pressure is almost unbearably good, and I push back, trying to make him enter me. He swats my ass and gives my hair a firm tug, hauling me backward until I’m almost upright against him, his other hand snaking around my throat.

“I’m gonna hold you here and rail your cunt until I come,” he whispers, his breath hot and ragged in my ear. “There’ll be time to worship every fucking perfect inch of you, but there’s no way I can keep control, not this first time.”

He pushes against me, jamming my body against the basin as his cock opens me up, stretching me as the first few inches slip inside. My mouth falls open, and I see Sasha’s face behind me in the mirror, contorted with ecstasy.

“Fuck, Josie.” He hisses through his teeth as he slides home, drawing a shocked gasp from me as his girth forges into my tightness. “You were worth the wait. Nothing could ever feel this good.”

I can’t speak. Just the relentless presence of him inside me drives the air from my lungs, and for a moment, I can only *feel* him. Then his fingers tighten around my neck, and he pulls free of my clinging pussy, his pierced tip setting my nerves alight. I reach for my clit, working it frantically as he forges in and out of me, and I’m astonished to find my climax is already well within reach.

It’s hot as fuck to watch Sasha in the mirror. This cold, ruthless killer, the man who inspires so much fear, is enslaved by my body. His low grunts, whispered dirty talk, and grinding movements are a testament to his desperate arousal, his muscles corded and stone-like as he chases his own peak.

“My wife.” He feels my breath catch and understands I’m close. “Come for me, *moya zhená*. Say my fucking name. Who are you coming for?”

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. Sasha slows down, and I moan with frustration. He releases my hair and slaps my hand away from my clit,

replacing it with his own.

“Who are you coming for?” he asks again.

“You,” I say, almost sobbing as he works my tender clit. “I’m coming for you, Sasha.”

He rolls his hips, skewering me deep, and I cry out.

“And who am I?”

“My husband.” I’m so close to orgasm that I can barely utter the words. “You’re my husband.”

“Damn fucking right.”

In a quick movement, he pushes my leg even higher, opening me up so he can fuck me deeper. I brace my hands on the wall on either side of the mirror and surrender to the feeling as he pounds me, his fingers still manipulating my clit. The mirror is steamed up now, and my husband’s body and face are a blur, but I can feel him everywhere. His cock thickens as he tenses, and he bottoms out hard, tipping me over the edge.

I cry out, the sound cut off by Sasha’s huge hand squeezing my throat. The feeling is scary but incredible, and my orgasm intensifies, my pussy spasming wildly as Sasha fills me with his come. He holds me to him, his cock twitching as he gives me every drop.

As our breathing settles, he pulls free and shocks me by pushing two fingers into my pussy, coating his fingers in our mingled fluids. He reaches around me and wipes the mirror with his arm so I can see as he rubs the wetness onto my lips.

“Open up,” he says, and I obey, watching as he slips his fingers over my tongue. His come is mixed with the tang of my arousal, and I suck at his fingers, enjoying the lewdness of it. Sasha grins with devilish satisfaction.

“You taste that?” he asks. “You are mine, and I am yours. Never doubt it.”



Two weeks later...

Josie

Christmas is just a few days away, and the world outside is gearing up for the festivities, but we're too wrapped up in one another to care.

Sasha and I sleep in one another's arms every night as though we've been together for years. He's busy during the day, dealing with both bratva and legitimate business, and he likes to tease me about coming back to work with him. I know he's kidding; as far as he's concerned, his wife does not need to earn a dime of her own money. Strange how I feel kept but not owned for the first time.

The future might be something worth looking forward to instead of the dark, lonely path I always feared it would be. My bratva husband may be rough around the edges, but Dulcie was right—there's vulnerability below the bravado and swagger.

As usual, I wake up before my husband. When I leave the bathroom, Sasha is awake, lounging on the duvet. He arches an eyebrow at me.

"You're dressed," he says. "Damn shame."

"Well, good morning to you, too." I sit at the end of the bed. "Sleep well?"

"Beside you? Always." He sits up and clutches my wrist, dragging me into his arms. He's naked, and he looks like a sculpture, with his carved-out muscles and huge, strong hands. "Being with you is the only peace I've ever known, Josie. You know that, right?"

"Looks that way." I plant a swift but deep kiss on his lips, and he growls under his breath. "But you have me here under duress, so you'd better make it worth my while."

"I would love to stay in this bed all day and make you scream my name until your throat is sore," he says, rolling away from me, "but we are getting

properly married tomorrow, and there's stuff we gotta do."

I'm not listening. As Sasha gets to his feet, the light catches the taut skin over his bicep, and I see something I recognize but never noticed before.

"Your arm." I stand and go to him, touching the silvery trails that are visible between the tattoos on his inner elbow. "Is that...?"

Sasha looks at me for a long moment, then drops his head. "Yes. I would have told you, I promise. But after everything you said about your mom, there never seemed to be a good time."

"So you were a junkie."

"I was. But it's been a long time since I last used." He wraps his fingers around mine and kisses the back of my hand. "I fell in with some bad people after my mother died. Papa didn't care what I was doing anyway—to him, I was invisible. I lied to Vlad and hid it from everyone for quite a while, but things started to fall apart. When drug addicts have money, they can afford to make a real fucking mess of their lives."

I stare at him. Sasha could have done anything he wanted, and he chose heroin? All the privilege and wealth in the world, and he squandered it on that shit.

"Organized crime and drugs go hand in hand, don't they?" I take my hand back and step away from him. "Are the Kislevs into that? Does your bratva deal?"

"No." Sasha sweeps his hair off his face, and I see his expression. This is hard for him. "Our family doesn't deal in flesh or drugs. We leave that to other people, but it doesn't happen on our territory, and we don't profit from it."

He won't look at my face, and I see the shame.

My mom always felt like her addiction was a fundamental and irreversible weakness. Although she could stay clean, she would never be able to wash away the stain of her failure to face up to her problems. The junk had always been her golden highway to freedom, a path to a different place, if only for a short while.

“Why did you do it?” I ask.

Sasha shrugs. “Because I was lonely, stupid, and impulsive.” He smiles. “I guess not much has changed except for the first part.”

I smile. “We can work on the rest. But I kinda like you the way you are.”

He reaches for my waist and pulls me to him, kissing me tenderly on the forehead. “You *like* me?” he laughs. “Where’s the fun in that?”



We’re at a cozy brunch bar in the East Village, slinging back Mimosas and tucking into brioche waffles. It’s all fun and flirting until Sasha drops a bombshell on me.

“I already chose your wedding dress, by the way,” he says nonchalantly.

I freeze, my fork halfway to my mouth. “Oooh, no,” I say, scowling at his idiotic smile. “No way.”

“Yes way.” Sasha tops up his glass from a pitcher. “After what you pulled with Morgana when she and Vlad were getting married? You’re choosing *nothing*. I already decided on the venue, seeing as you were dragging your heels, and then I thought, ‘Hey, why not save your wife the work and do it all yourself?’”

“You’ve got some nerve.”

“That’s very true,” he sips his drink, “but not the point. This second wedding will appease the *komissiya* and get them off my back *and* yours. Once I’ve settled up with Tosca, we’re in the clear, and if you wanna divorce me, you can. Just give it a few months, so I don’t look like the biggest loser on the face of the Earth.”

This is the first time he’s mentioned divorce, and I don’t like it. I assumed I had to stay married to him forever.

“I still don’t understand why this has to happen in the first place,” I say.

Sasha sighs. “Because my world is dangerous, full of people who overreact dramatically to real and imagined slights. I married and brought you home, humiliating Claudia and her father. If I told the *komissiya* that you didn’t want to be married to me, that it was all a mistake? Tosca would have had you killed. No doubt about it.”

I feel my blood pressure drop and take a deep breath to steady myself. “So the marriage needs to be legitimized, and you have to make amends with Tosca, or I’ll die?”

“Yes. At least, it’s a risk I’m unwilling to take.” He undoes a shirt button at his neckline, and I’m distracted by the thought of his bare chest. “But once this is sorted out, I can’t and won’t force you to stay with me.”

“Why didn’t you tell me that before?” I ask.

Sasha furrows his brow. “Because I had no plans to let you go. But something changed. I don’t know when it happened. I feel—”

A shrill sound pierces our bubble, and Sasha takes his cell phone from his pocket. He taps the screen several times, and then he’s on his feet.

“I gotta go, *zolutse*.” He throws a couple of hundred dollar bills on the table. “You stay awhile if you want. I’ll send you a car so you can meet Morgana.”

“Meet Morgana? Where?”

“I booked out the Guerlain spa at The Plaza, so you girls can stay out of my hair while I get the rest of the wedding stuff dealt with. Go get pampered, drink prosecco, whatever. My card’s on account, so spare no expense.”

I watch my husband pick up his jacket, slipping it on in one fluid movement. He is fast and efficient when he needs to be, and I recognize he’s in business mode. The message clearly has nothing to do with our impending nuptials, but I decide not to ask. I want to know what he was about to say, but it’s gone, the shutters in his mind slammed closed.

He’s got work to do. I’m just in the way.

Sasha cups my cheek and kisses me. “I’ll see you soon. Don’t worry. Everything will be fine.”



Sasha

I drive toward NoLita, ready to deal with the task at hand. But I'm preoccupied with other problems that lurk in the shadows, ready to blow my world apart.

I didn't exactly lie to Josie. I did indeed kick the heroin; that's an absolute fact. And yes, the Kislev bratva has nothing to do with drugs, but that wasn't always the case. My father was happy to make money from other people's misery, and it's only since Vlad took control that we wound down that side of the business. Back when Josie's mother was victimized by a dealer, things were very different. The man who put the junk into that vulnerable woman's hands could have worked for us.

Or, more accurately, for me.

Papa figured I was disposable, so he gave me a dangerous job—running the crews of dealers across the city who were charged with selling our stock. In practice, this meant working closely with pimps too, and I enjoyed the perks. It's a miracle I never encountered Josie before, but I guess she never belonged to a scumbag who was loyal to my bratva.

Still, I wasn't *just* a junkie. I was a pusher, a supplier. A man who traded in pain and destruction. Death, dehumanization, and wasted potential were my bread and butter back then. I was as bad, if not worse than the man who dragged Josie's mom into his twisted world.

When Papa learned I was an addict, he took the business away, saying he couldn't trust me with the goods. He had a point, but knowing I'd failed at the only thing he'd ever asked me to do stung. He always told me I was pointless and good for nothing, and I went out of my way to prove him right. Ironically, it was only when the heroin drenched my brain in euphoric bliss that I could drown out my father's voice.

I hear him now louder than ever. *One job, Sasha. So simple. Can't you do anything without fucking it up?*

Yes, I can. I'm determined to see this through to ensure Josie's safety. It's the one thing I can do right.

Because I know she will want to leave in the end. She will see the truth even if I don't tell her what I've done. I have nothing to offer her except my obsession, and that won't make up for my fickle, self-sabotaging heart.

Love leaves, and so will she. It's always the pain that stays behind.

The message was from an unknown number, but it was definitely Tosca. The guy must be incredibly paranoid.

I arrive at the motel and park across the street, my eyes fixed on the entrance. It's one of those grimy pay-by-the-hour establishments scattered across the city, a hub for illegal transactions where people, drugs, and money change hands daily. The staff here are well-compensated in exchange for their forgetfulness and reluctance to cooperate with the police.

A ratty-looking inflatable Santa outside provides absolutely zero seasonal atmosphere, but it doesn't matter; no amount of festive decor could make this shithole seem welcoming. I'm in no hurry, and my thoughts drift, plunging me into hedonistic daydreams.

For Josie, I was celibate for months on end, and she didn't even know. She had no idea my powerful sex drive was channeled, focused on a single goal—to feel her tight pussy around my cock. The thought of fucking another woman wasn't just unappealing. It disgusted me. All the beautiful women of the world were suddenly and completely invisible. I could notice and acknowledge beauty, but it was meaningless. Josie had enslaved my heart, soul, and body without so much as touching me, so when she finally did...*holy shit*.

My wife has awakened something primal within me, a fierce desire I can't ignore. I'm incapable of denying myself; her body is my drug of choice, and I'm getting a real habit. I don't care if it kills me. I'll die happy.

God, she feels good. Every single time. So fucking incredible, her skin silky under my hands...

No. If I keep thinking about her, I'll end up getting arrested for jacking off in my car. I'd look back on it and laugh, but today is not the day to attract

attention.

Time to get to work.

I take my gun from the glove box and tuck it into my waistband beneath my jacket. I cross the road and stride purposefully into the motel. No one accosts me; I look like a man with somewhere to be. I slap the button for the elevator and take out my cell, checking the room number for the third time.

A minute later, I'm outside the door. The corridor is silent, and I take out the pistol, checking if the silencer is correctly attached. I hold the weapon behind my back and knock on the door.

"Sir?" I say. "I'm the relief concierge. There's a problem with your charge account."

My mark opens the door, his expression frosty. He's a pallid man with a paunch and a dusty patch of cocaine under his nose.

"Sorry to bother you, sir," I say, suppressing the Russian burr in my accent. "Your name is Larry?"

"That's a bit informal," he scowls. "What's the problem?"

I raise the gun and squeeze the trigger. Within a split second, the hapless fool realizes what's happening and starts to turn aside. With a muffled 'whump,' the bullet pierces his temple, and he falls onto me, blood and chunks of brain everywhere.

"Thanks, Larry," I say aloud as I bundle him into the room. "You fucked up my clean shot *and* my clean shirt." I close the door and dump the dead man on the ground, taking a better look at his face.

There's something oddly familiar about this guy, though I can't quite place him. Over the years, I've met countless scumbags and climbers, and I've dispatched more than a fair share of them. My memory for faces isn't great, but I'm glad I can't identify this particular loser right now. How stupid can you be to fuck a mafia don's married sister? He deserved everything he got.

Finally, things are looking up. Wedding number two is tomorrow, followed by a meeting with the *komissiya* the day after. Then, it'll be done. My world

can return to some semblance of normalcy, whatever that means. And just maybe, I'll gather the courage to risk giving Josie my heart.

Because if it's a choice between that and losing her, there's no doubt—I have to take the chance. Life without her would be no life at all.



Josie

The spa is fantastic, all gray marble and relaxing soundscapes. Morgana and I bob around in the hydrotherapy pool, surrounded by tinkling waterfalls, while we wait for our treatments to be prepared.

“I’m so looking forward to this,” Morgana says, leaning against the side of the pool. “A leg massage is just what I need. I feel heavier every day. My ankles are like an elephant’s.”

I smile. Of course, my beautiful best friend is only more stunning now, her blooming belly making her look like a fertility goddess. It’s good to see her so serene, and I envy her. I’m restless, struggling to let the calm environment settle my thoughts.

I wanted Sasha to fall for me, and I think it’s happening. Something has definitely changed, and I don’t think it’s just sex that did it. We opened up to each other physically and emotionally, and things will never be the same between us. So why am I still so afraid?

Morgana sees my pensive expression and clicks her fingers in front of me. “Helloooo? Stop daydreaming about Sasha for a minute, will you? Surely you two have been at it every second since you returned to New York?”

“Actually,” I interrupt with a shy smirk, “I put up a bit of a fight at first.”

Morgana’s mouth falls open in astonishment. “You’re kidding! Why? And seriously, no offense, but I’ve seen Sasha—*how?*”

“It was the only power I had over him. Now I’ve given it up.” I turn to Morgana. “What do you think is going on in his head?”

Morgana furrows her brow in thought. “Vladi knows him best. He says that Sasha has always kept women at arm’s length, but it’s different with you. You have a hold on him, making him aspire to be a better man. He was lost the moment he met you.”

I sweep my wet hair back from my face. “Sasha told me I could divorce him when all this mess with Tosca is sorted out. Why would he let me go?”

“These bratva men have a way of making things happen. Maybe he wants to see whether you’ll choose to be with him.”

Her words strike a chord with me. Every man I’ve ever known has wanted to possess me, and they’d go to great lengths to achieve it. What I desired was often inconsequential. But now, with all the power and wealth at Sasha’s disposal, is he truly willing to let me go?

Only two types of men would do that—a man who doesn’t give a shit and a man who is truly, deeply in love.

My husband is obsessed with me, but now he’s got what he wants. Is his interest already waning?

“Josie, you’re too hard on yourself.” Morgana scooches closer and puts her head on my shoulder. “You think Sasha is just a player and won’t change, least of all for you. Well, *I* think you’re wrong. You’re a wonderful person, and he sees that. He has the same problem as you; he believes he’s not enough.” She nudges me. “But I see the effect you have on him. All he has to do is look at you, and he’s home.”

I close my eyes. I believe her because I’ve seen it too—Sasha’s moments of vulnerability when he gazes at me, seeking solace and direction.

“You’re his lighthouse, Josie,” Morgana continues, squeezing my hand. “His sanctuary. And when he stops fighting himself, you’d better be prepared.”

“For what?”

“For devotion like you never imagined,” Morgana says gently. “Because if you asked, that man would rearrange the stars for you.”



When we get home, we’re glowing, our skin rubbed down, polished, and moisturized. We had a light supper at the hotel, but it wasn’t enough for Morgana, and we laughed our asses off as Sasha’s driver tried to get the limousine through the Taco Bell drive-thru.

Vlad, Arman, and Avel are sitting in the lounge. Our giggling brings all three of them into the foyer, and Vlad laughs when he sees our takeout bags.

“Morgana, *lisichka*. I guess you were still hungry?”

Morgana playfully sticks her tongue out at her husband. “Sue me. I’m growing a human here. How far can I get on finger sandwiches and macarons?” She retrieves a chili cheese burrito from one of the takeout bags and extends it to Avel. “Here you go. I wouldn’t dare visit Taco Bell without bringing something for you. Isn’t this stuff like ninety percent of your diet?”

“Thanks.” Avel takes the burrito and grins. “And no, of course not. Maybe seventy percent.”

“Wait a minute,” Arman says, looking past us. “Isn’t Sasha with you?”

“No,” I say, taking in the concern on the men’s faces. “I haven’t heard from him. He had some business to deal with.”

“I had a call earlier,” Vlad says. “A cop. He told me Sasha cut him up the other day for getting too close to you, Josie. That true?”

“Yeah. Why? Is he in trouble?”

“We can smooth that out. “It’s mostly the man’s pride that’s hurt. But we have an understanding with the local law enforcement; our people stay alive, theirs stay out of our business, and they only hassle the low-level criminals. The last thing I need is—”

The front door bursts open, and Sasha walks in. He moves casually, his stride relaxed. His shirt is soaked with blood.

“Jesus, Sasha!” I cry, running to him. “What happened? Are you alright?”

“I’m fine.” He catches my wrists, pushing me gently aside. “Just had a little altercation. No big deal.”

“Who did you kill?” Arman asks. “I’m assuming the owner of all that blood didn’t have enough left to stay alive.”

“Like I said,” Sasha glares at Arman, “it’s no big deal.”

Vlad is silent, but his presence is imposing. Everyone looks at him except Sasha, who avoids his brother's eyes.

“What the fuck have you been up to, *brat*?” Vlad asks. “Because you seem to be losing your shit. You mess Josie around and cause a fight with our rivals. You attack a fucking *cop*. Now you return home, fresh from a murder I know nothing about,” Vlad's voice rises in anger, “and you shrug it off? Act like it's no one's business but yours?”

Sasha removes his jacket and throws it over the back of the couch. “It *is* my business, Vlad,” he says, “so leave it alone. There's no problem here.”

Vlad jabs a finger at him. “I swear to God, Sasha. You'd better get in line. We worked too hard for you to get careless just because you're in love.”

I freeze, and Morgana shoots Vlad a murderous look.

“Vladi,” she says. “Enough. Leave Sasha and Josie alone. The wedding is tomorrow, and we must all play our part for the *komissiya*. Don't fight now.”

“Alright, *lisichka*.” Vlad nods at Sasha. “You—get a goddamn shower. You're a fucking psycho sometimes, you know that?”

Sasha gives a little bow. “Acknowledged. And that works in your favor most of the time, so don't be a hypocrite.”

Vlad laughs, and the tension is broken. Sasha grabs my hand, and we retreat upstairs, blood dripping on the carpet as we go.



The shower is running, the bathroom filling with wintergreen-scented steam. I unbutton Sasha's soaked shirt, mesmerized by the sight of blood drying on his inked skin.

This is who my husband is. A killer. A man who can wear another man's blood like war paint and not find his conscience troubled. A man who could force me to stay by his side but wants me to decide for myself.

But is he really a man who loves me? Is that even possible?

My thoughts are swept away by Sasha's hands on my waist. He sweeps my tank top over my head, his bloody hands on my bare flesh.

"You're safe," he murmurs. "My debt to Tosca is paid. The *komissiya* will demand he backs off, and that will be the end of it. You can leave, stay, tell me to fuck myself, whatever." He drops a kiss on my shoulder. "The important thing is you'll not get hurt on my account."

"And if I stay?" His touch heats my skin, and I lean into him, the coppery scent of death in my nose. "Anything could happen to me. This is just one crisis averted, Sasha. There will be other times. More danger. How could it be any other way?"

He undoes my zipper and drops to his knees, tugging my jeans down and off. I shudder as he kisses my hipbone.

"I won't let it happen." His tongue traces my belly button. "I'll protect you whether you love me or not."

"And you?" I whisper. "Do you love me? Vlad said it, Morgana, too. Is it true?"

Sasha hooks his fingers under the elastic of my panties, pulling them down. He stands and sheds his remaining clothes, standing naked before me.

"This is me, *zlotse*." He gestures at himself. "I'm a fucking mess. An impulsive, possessive, neurotic asshole with a chronic fear of intimacy and a desperate need to consume you like you consumed me."

His face contorts into anguish. "For the love of all that is sacred, Josie. Yes, I love you. I'm lost in the elegance of your movements, the symphony of your voice, the profound beauty of your thoughts. The world fades to gray when you're not with me. I've experienced no pleasure as great as the feel of your skin on mine. You're both my muse and my damnation, but I'd rather be crushed under the weight of a shattered heart than have never known you at all. The agony would be fucking worth it."

It's not Shakespeare, but one look at my husband's tortured expression and my doubts crumble to dust.

He means it. Sasha Kislev loves me. The woman who never thought any love would find me, let alone a passion as intense as this. My man doesn't just want me; he needs me. I'm the addiction he cannot kick.

I sink to the ground before him.

"You love me?" I say. "Let me taste it."



Sasha

Everything is gonna be okay. My wife is at my feet.

This woman will stand before all my associates tomorrow and commit to me. She won't be drunk or coerced, won't be afraid. She'll stand there and tell the world she's really mine. But right now, she's on her knees. I'll see she kneels for no one but me ever again.

I take her chin in my hand and tilt her head back so that I can look into her eyes. She's so beautiful, especially when she's vulnerable and exposed like this. She's trembling, and my heart swells with adoration.

Without a word, Josie reaches for me, her fingers moving over my thickening cock. My breathing begins to deepen beneath the pressure, and I close my eyes, reveling in the sensation.

She takes her time, tracing her fingertips over my skin. I shudder as she begins to move along its length, the tension building within me with every stroke. My breathing grows increasingly heavy as her touch intensifies, and I slide a hand into her hair, willing her to put her mouth where I want it.

“Open your pretty lips, and let me give you what you want, *zlotse*,” I say. “You're fucking teasing me, and a man can only take so much.” I grip a fistful of her hair and tug it, making her look up at me again. “I could get nasty if you're not careful.”

Something flashes in Josie's eyes. She's as fired up as I am, and I think I know why.

I went out tonight and shed another man's blood for her protection. I'd do it again a thousand times, and she knows it. She's not afraid of me—it's my savage side she wants right now.

Josie grips my aching cock and pumps it hard, drawing a harsh gasp from me. She grins wickedly and opens her mouth. I can take no more, and with a roar, I grab her head in both hands, desperate to feel her warm lips wrapped around me.

She slides down so deeply onto my cock that my brain short-circuits, and it takes a few moments of blissed-out confusion before I get a hold of myself. I let out a deep groan of pleasure, sliding my hips to meet each of her movements. Her tongue teases my piercing, sending bolts of ecstasy through me and driving me closer and closer to losing control.

Josie's hands are on my thighs, trying to hold off my thrusts. My cock throbs in her warm mouth, and I slam to the back of her throat, making her gag hard.

"Oh fuck, yeah," I groan. "That's what you want, huh? My wife is a dirty slut for my cock?" I pull free and grasp my slick length in my fist, a thick strand of saliva connecting my swollen tip to her lips. "Tell me what you want. Because if you leave it up to me, I'm gonna fuck your mouth and come all over that beautiful face."

Josie is trying to get her breath. Her face is streaked with mascara, and her hair sticks to her face, but she never looked more gorgeous.

"Make me come, please," she begs. I groan as I rub my cock over her lips, and she laps at the tip. "I want to feel you inside me, Sasha."

I pull her to her feet and kiss her roughly. She melts her body to mine, and I slide my hand between her thighs. She's soaked, her pussy lips yielding eagerly to my touch.

She gasps as I sink two fingers into her, drawing her wetness back out of her and rubbing it over her clit. The contact is enough to make her knees buckle, and I clutch her waist to stop her from falling. I stare into her eyes as I touch her, my erection hot and almost painfully hard against her thigh.

"I love hearing you beg." I rest my wet fingers on her lips, sliding them over her tongue to the back of her throat. "Here. Taste how much you want me. Now that I finally have you, you'll take everything I have to give."

I grab her hand and pull her into the shower, pushing her against the cold tiled wall. Our steamy breath mingles as I kiss her searingly hot mouth. My other hand slides over her back, seeking out any traces of tension, but all I find are the luscious curves that have dominated my dreams for so long.

"I want you to let go," I whisper, my lips brushing hers. "Just feel what I'm doing."

My hands move faster now, exploring her body as if it were new to me. Her gasps are like music, and they become softer and more sensual as I touch and tease every inch of her warm skin with my fingertips. Her nipples blossom under my tongue, and I tease them until she's almost sobbing with need. When I finally part her legs and slip a finger inside her tight warmth, she writhes against me with pleasure.

I rub circles onto the bundle of nerves deep inside her, coaxing out tiny cries that only encourage me to go harder and faster. I stroke her with growing speed, pressing my thumb against her clit and slipping two more fingers inside.

"I can't take it anymore," she says, wrapping her arms around me and raking my back with her nails. "Fuck me, please."

"All in good time, *moya zhená*. Be a good girl and come for me now. You're doing so well."

Josie's head drops back as I push her over the edge, and I feel her body quake around my fingers. She gasps out my name in a strangled cry that thrills me from head to toe as her pleasure erupts throughout the steamy room.

I drop my head to her shoulder and kiss the sensitive skin there, waiting as she rides out her orgasm until I feel her body relax beneath mine. She's quivering, and I take a moment to savor the sight of her before pushing away from the wall and spinning her around.

"Now let's see if you can handle more," I say, smacking her ass hard enough to make her gasp.

I pin her hands to the wall with mine and enter her in one swift thrust. She cries out as I fill her completely, and I begin moving inside of her, my cock surging wildly against her tightness.

"I fit like I was made for you," I murmur, rolling my hips, "but only just. Your pussy is so tiny. So good on my cock." I slap her ass, the sound sharp and sudden, and she squeals. "You like the way I rail you, Josie?"

She doesn't answer fast enough for me, and I decide to up the ante. I reach out and grab her neck from behind, crushing my body to hers and pressing her breasts against the cold tile. My mouth is beside her ear, my free hand

reaching for her clit again.

“Tell me you love my cock fucking you,” I whisper, “or I won’t let you come again.”

I don’t know if I can follow through on the threat. The sensation of her inner walls gripping me pushes me ever closer to the edge. I force myself to slow down, massaging her clit gently as I skewer her pussy, pinning her to the wall.

“Don’t stop.” Josie’s voice is breathy, as though she’s struggling to find the words. “Oh my God, Sasha, you’re such an asshole. Of course I love it. I love the way you fuck me, so fuck me!”

It’s all I wanted to hear, and I pick up the pace, never letting up on her clit. She throws her head back against my shoulder, and when her inner muscles flutter around me, I can no longer hold back.

Josie gives a ragged cry, and my release shudders through my body, filling her clutching pussy and running down her thighs. I hold her upright as the water flows, reviving us.

“So,” I say, turning her shoulders to kiss her, “I can’t work it out. Is it my love or my murderous tendencies that get you going?”

She laughs. “I don’t know. But one or the other is bound to be the death of me.”



The following morning...

Josie

Morgana and I stand before the dress bag hanging on the wall. I draw a deep breath.

Sasha got up early and left with his brothers. All I know is that we must be ready in an hour when the car arrives. I reach out and take hold of the zipper.

“Wait.” I glance at Morgana. “What are *you* gonna be wearing?”

She grits her teeth. “I didn’t want to mention it, but Sasha said Lili and I must wear white. We took delivery of some beautiful satin maxi dresses yesterday.”

I’m furious. How *dare* he? That’s just—

I unzip the bag roughly and nearly keel over when I see what’s inside.

My gown is red. Rich vermillion mikado silk, with a beaded corset bodice and dropped mini sleeves. It’s cut in the mermaid shape, kicking out into a fluted tulle below the knee, and it’s *gorgeous*.

“Woah.” Morgana touches the dress. “So Sasha certainly isn’t concerned with tradition. I’ll bet this isn’t happening at the family church after all.”

“No, he wanted me to choose, but he decided for me in the end and never told me,” I say. “I assume he just gave up and picked a hotel somewhere.”

We unbag the dress, and Morgana helps me into it. As she laces the back, I start to cry, my shoulders shuddering. Morgana spins me around and stares at me, searching my eyes.

“What’s wrong?” She wipes a tear from my cheek. “If this is all wrong, just go through the motions today and leave when it’s all over. However confused you are about Sasha, he didn’t give you a choice here. You don’t owe him anything, you know.”

“I tried so hard to hate him,” I sob. “But the things he says to me, Morgana. The things he does...”

She smiles. “I remember that one. You’ll be okay. The choice will be up to you in the end. Sasha may be an asshole, but I don’t think he’d make you stay if you wanted to escape.”

It was all I wanted, once. To put thousands of miles between Sasha and me and block him out.

He was always there, affecting me, invading my thoughts and dreams. I’d rather be poor with Sasha than rich with Marc—all the Kislev millions make no difference. All I can see is *him*.

My feelings are like a runaway train. I can stamp on the brakes, making them squeal and spark, but I’m still hurtling along relentlessly, out of control. Time will tell whether I regain control or crash and burn.



The car is a sleek black limousine, and we all pile in. My girls are a vision, especially Lili. She’s styled her wheat-colored hair in spiral curls, pulled into a loose updo, and her lips are painted with a deep red stain.

“You look fantastic, Lil,” I say, planting a kiss on her cheek, “but you drank far too many of those Kir Royales while we were getting ready. Vlad will be furious if he thinks we let you get drunk, so don’t sway on your way down the aisle, got it?”

Lili stifles a small belch. “I’m fine, I promise. Morgana will prop me up if she sees me wobble.”

Morgana raises an eyebrow. “Hun, if you fall on me, we’re *both* going down.”

We weave through the streets, and I begin to recognize small landmarks. We’re somewhere familiar. A place I have known well for years.

“Could it be?” I whisper. “Has he done what I think he’s done?”

The car purrs to a halt before the building that means so much to me. I spent so long inside these walls, losing myself in worlds I'd never visit, being near my mom as she scrubbed and vacuumed. It was here that I first read *The Little Mermaid*, a story that always resonated with me. Who wouldn't risk it all for love? And, when love is lost, we all want to give up and fade away, just as the mermaid did in the original story. Disney made it all too easy—no wonder little girls get a shock when they grow up and find out how it really goes.

“Well, I'll be damned.” Morgana takes my hand. “New York City Library. *Your* library.”

We see Arman waiting for us on the steps, looking sharp in a black suit with a matching tie and shirt. He runs down and opens the passenger door, helping Lili onto the sidewalk. I catch his eyes flick up and down, but then he composes himself, taking a step back. He reaches for Morgana's hand, and we're all out of the car within a minute.

“What a sight you all are,” Arman says. “I'll, uh, let them know you're here.” He scoots up the stairs and inside without a backward glance.

“Hoo boy, Lili,” Morgana says. “I think you're not-quite-brother's brain just short-circuited at the sight of you.”

Lili blushes prettily. “He's just not used to seeing me dressed up. He's kinda over-protective sometimes.”

Morgana and I exchange glances. We know all too well what that means when it comes to these Kislev boys, but neither of us says any more on the subject.

Arman appears at the door again, beckoning us. We join him, and he ushers Morgana and Lili in ahead. His eyes follow Lili for a beat or two, and I smile. Then he takes my arm.

“I'll walk you down if you like. I had to be accepted into this family, too, and like you, I didn't have anyone else in this world.

I give him a nudge. “Thanks, Arman. Let's do this.”



The colossal entrance foyer is divided into four quadrants, where the guests sit. I'm shocked at how many people showed up and feel a sharp stab of shame that none of them are here for me. To my astonishment, all the women are in white, and the men wear black. The walkway to the center is lined with pillar candles in hurricane lanterns, and red rose petals cover the floor in a blanket of soft crimson.

Music is playing from somewhere. It's Lilyana, playing the piano off to the side. She is singing too, a beautiful aria in Italian. The room is silent, the perfect acoustics giving weight and reach to the song.

I look ahead and see Sasha. He is also in black, but his shirt and tie are red, to match me. A celebrant stands behind him, his brothers to his left. Morgana sits near him, and she turns to give me a little wave. The song reaches a crescendo, and Arman leads me toward the man who is already my husband.

Why am I so nervous? It's for show, to appease the bratva *komissiya* and ensure Sasha's safety and mine. How many of the things he says are just posturing? Does he just want to ensure no one, including me, undermines his authority? I guess he owns me until he doesn't.

Still, though. No one ever looked at me like Sasha is looking at me right now. He's transfixed, staring like I might evaporate into the ether if he blinks. He's smiled at me many times, but this isn't his arrogant asshole grin or patronizing smirk. It's a smile of pure, unadulterated sweetness, as though just to see me this way gives him peace. It's unexpected, and tears prick my eyes again, but I blink them away.

Arman releases me, and Sasha takes my hand. He winks at his brother and takes his seat, glad to be able to settle his eyes on Lili again. After all, she's performing, and watching her is allowed. Avel gives me a solemn nod but then breaks into a broad smile, and I give it back.

Sasha and I turn to face one another as the song ebbs to a close.

"This is amazing," I murmur, stepping closer so he can hear me. "I never thought anyone would do something like this for me."

Sasha puts his hands on my waist and kisses my cheek. “*Zolotse*. I’m not just anyone. I’m your husband, your lover, your protector. I’ll give you anything within my power, even if I have to bargain with God to see it done. Or The Devil, come to think of it. He and I already know each other.”

“I expect he’s already got a room ready for you,” I laugh.

“A room?” Sasha rolls his eyes. “If every bad deed in life buys one brick, I’ve built a fucking mansion by now. And just as well, because I intend to see out the afterlife in the manner I’m accustomed to.”



Sasha

I'm lightheaded, struggling to believe it's real. And maybe it isn't.

Josie had no choice the first time around, and truthfully, she didn't have any way of getting out of it this time, either. But I meant it when I said I wouldn't make her stay with me. This wedding may be the real deal, or I'm deluded, but I'd rather tell myself a beautiful lie than face an ugly truth. For now, just for today, I'll let myself feel everything.

Because I'm in love with her.

I love Josie. It's there, eating away at me whenever I think of losing her. I tried so hard to push it back, but it overwhelmed me, and now I'm consumed by the sublime terror that comes from knowing she holds my soul in her hands.

Red suits her. The color makes her pale skin all the more luminous, the candlelight dancing shadows over her smooth shoulders. It cost more than the GDP of a small nation to pull this wedding off in record time, but it was worth all seven figures to stand with Josie in this place that means so much to her.

Everyone I love is here with me, except for Rocco, and not for the first time, I feel his absence keenly. Signora G is the other notable no-show, but she never leaves her home, even if she does remember an invitation. Even if she did, she'd drink half an Aperol spritz and fall asleep in a corner.

Josie sees me smiling. "Let me in on the joke?" she says.

I squeeze her waist. "For once, I'm not playing anything for laughs. I mean it. I couldn't ask for more."

Lilyana's song fades away, and the celebrant starts talking to the assembly about the risks of love.

Love was always a precarious thing to me, a double-edged sword that could both heal and wound. The loss of my mother and Rocco made me fear getting close to anyone again. But at this moment, it feels like a risk worth taking.

I tried to resist, but I can't help it—I'm learning. Love is more than just desire, deeper than obsession, and the antithesis of power or dominance. It's about trust, vulnerability, and choosing to be with someone despite the darkness that life sometimes throws in your path.

I have my demons, my past, and my own insecurities. But in Josie's eyes, I see acceptance and forgiveness, a chance for redemption. It's as though she sees through the hardened exterior I built over the years straight into the heart of the man I wanted to become.

She makes me want to change. To love her isn't enough; I want to be everything she needs. Love is a risk, a leap into the unknown, but with Josie, it feels like the most natural thing in the world. I want to protect her, cherish her, and be the man she deserves.

"Hey," I murmur in Josie's ear. "Remember when I told you I'm not the man to save you?" She nods, and I pull her closer. "I lied, *moya zhená*. I'm the only man who will ever save you, and I'll do it again and again. Count on it."

The celebrant is telling me to kiss my wife. I've never been happier to follow an order in my life. Josie slides her hands over my chest and around my neck, raking her nails through the shaved hair at my nape, and I give a low growl, ready to taste her soft lips.

With a crash, the door flies open. Josie snaps her head to look, and I follow suit. All the guests stare at the woman standing in the doorway, making a show of fussing with her hair.

Josie scowls. "Claudia," she whispers. "Of course. Is she wearing a fucking wedding dress?"

There's no denying it. Claudia's outfit is meant to draw attention. The flouncy skirt and long train are ridiculously ostentatious, as is the revealing neckline. She didn't have the guts to wear a veil, and her choice of tiara only makes her look even more like a child playing dress-up.

As I watch, Claudia glances around the room, and a sour sneer twists her face when she sees the other guests' outfits. She can sense the stifled laughter as well as I can.

I knew Claudia would crash the wedding. I also had a hunch she'd act out in a way guaranteed to cast a shadow over the day. When Lilyana came to me with the snippet of news she'd heard, I knew what I had to do. Claudia has made a fool of herself again and only has herself to blame.

The celebrant coughs and repeats his line. "You may kiss your bride."

Josie's warm mouth yields to my kiss, her tongue teasing mine, and it's all I can do not to press my body against hers and devour her. I grip her waist tighter, and Josie breaks away, sensing my loss of control. Her eyes flash mischievously, and I smile as the assembly breaks into laughter and applause. Claudia is nowhere to be seen, and I sigh in relief.

To my surprise, Lili launches into a stunning rendition of 'Grande Amore,' silencing everyone instantly. Her voice rings out, the piano powering her passion, and tears sting my eyes. Vlad, Arman, and Avel go to stand beside her, and as they join in with the song, the guests who know the Italian lyrics add to the chorus.

Josie grips my hand tightly. "Jesus Christ, Sasha," she says, her voice cracking with emotion. "This song is beautiful. *Everything* is beautiful."

"It's for you." I kiss her forehead. "I know I'm an impulsive idiot, and I went about everything the wrong way. But the whole world sees the truth on my face, *zlotse*. You're mine, but never forget—I belong to you, too."

She rests her head on my chest as the song swells my heart, and I'm overwhelmed by gratitude.

Love terrifies me, and I'm hurling myself into the darkness of that fear. But I'm willing to fall hard and break every bone in my body if that's the price of living in the sunshine of my wife's love. She has changed my life in ways I couldn't have imagined, and I dare to hope she will choose to stay with me when the drama with Tosca is finally behind us. But I will never force her. I care too deeply for Josie to make her miserable just for my sake.

My father hurt my mother beyond measure by dragging her away from her idyllic life in Italy and forcing her to be his bride. Right now, in this beautiful moment, I miss her so much. I'd give anything to see her face and hear her voice.

Love is about giving someone the freedom to choose, even if that choice leads them away from you. The revelation proves something—I'm breaking out of my self-centered, defensive fortress, ready to surrender. My mother would be proud of me.

Josie and I walk confidently back down the aisle, hand in hand, and for the first time in my life, I truly know how it feels to be a king.

All I needed was my queen.



Josie

We mingle as servers hand out champagne. I smile graciously, taking offered hands and accepting congratulations. I'm keeping a wary eye on the room, wondering where Claudia went. It seems entirely plausible she will reappear and make a scene; that's her signature move.

Sasha wraps an arm around my waist. "I'm a genius," he murmurs. "Ask me why."

"I'm wondering more about how you've hidden it so well up to now."

He slaps my ass lightly. "Don't sass me. I'm being Mr. Bratva Bad-Ass right now, and I can do without you making me look like the idiot I am."

I smile. "So tell me. What did you do? You didn't invite Claudia, but you must have known she'd do something. Is that why I'm in red?"

He nods. "Claudia and Lilyana have a mutual friend. A girl at Juilliard. Claudia blabbed her plan to her, and she duly told Lili all about it. It wasn't difficult to contact the guests and let them know about the dress code change."

Morgana wobbles over and hands me a large glass of red wine. "I don't want it," I say. "I'm getting good and giggly on the fizz."

Morgana raises an eyebrow. "It's not for drinking. Target at two o'clock."

I look up to see Claudia striding toward us. People are staring at her, aghast that she's still here. As she gets nearer, I see she is wearing a full-on bridal gown, which looks utterly ridiculous.

I don't wait for her to start yelling. With a flick of my wrist, I fling the wine over her, drenching her from head to waist. She shrieks, and for a moment, I think she might burst into tears, but I'm sick of her bullshit. This is mine and Sasha's day, and it's time she faced reality.

"Just get out, Claudia," I say. "You're embarrassing yourself."

“I’m embarrassing myself?” she cries, wiping the wine from her eyes. “You’re nothing but a cheap whore. Everyone knows it. You’ll never really matter to Sasha or to anyone.”

Sasha takes my hand but says nothing. Claudia turns on her heel and storms toward the exit, stopping to throw a weak kick at the harpist. The woman is a pro and ignores her completely. With that, the world’s most pathetic wedding crasher is gone.

“The little bitch!” Morgana is incensed, her bump quivering with fury. “Let me at her. I’ll belly-bounce her into the sun!”

Vlad appears at her side and takes the glass from her hand. “You getting fresh on,” he sniffs the liquid, “lime and soda? No sumo wrestling for you, *lisichka*.”

I smile as Morgana slaps her husband playfully. I hope Sasha and I can be like them.

My eyes slide past Vlad, caught by a waving hand. A man is trying to get my attention. Who *is* that?

No. It can’t be.

Involuntarily, I squeeze Sasha’s hand so hard that he turns to look at me, concern etched on his features.

“What’s the matter?” he asks.

“Nothing.” I fight to keep my voice light. “I just hate confrontations. I’m glad she’s gone, and now I need more champagne.”

A guest calls Sasha’s name, and I take advantage of the distraction, slipping away from his side and tucking myself away in a quiet corner. The man I hoped I’d never see again appears at my side within seconds.

Carl Ellis, my former foster dad. He’s older, of course, and looks worse than his years despite his wedding attire. A mild spine curvature diminishes his height, but he still towers over me, and I’m transported back to when I was a kid.

Carl was the one who organized the so-called parties. His wife Janine liked to dress the girls up in slutty clothes to make us more appealing to her husband's disgusting friends. She couldn't have kids, and this was how she made it up to Carl—by pandering to his sick little hobby.

“Why are you here?” I say, my voice shaking. “You never looked for me in all these years. What do you want?”

“Isn't it obvious?” Carl's leer has a few more teeth missing, but it still raises the same sick feeling in my gut as it ever did. “I saw the announcement in the newspaper. Gone up in the world, haven't we?”

I wonder where Janine is and glance around the room, searching for her. Carl sees me looking and laughs.

“She's not here. She died last year, so now I can't get any more kids to foster. They won't let me have them on my own.” He has the gall to look sad. “I miss having children to look after, Josie. They were good times.”

I stare, too stunned to speak. *Good times?* He might remember that, but I sure don't. I lost my mom, only for him and Janine to hurt me in every way possible.

“So I guess you probably don't want your new hubby knowing about your history of slutting around—”

“You made me into a child prostitute,” I say, a sob escaping me. “I had no choice. How can you—”

“Doesn't matter.” Carl leans close, and I shudder. “I want money. A *lot* of it. Or I will tell your man about the gutter you crawled out of.”

I dart away across the room, tears blurring my vision. Can I *never* be free? Why can't I shake off the dirt my life dumped on me?

Sasha is deep in conversation, but he catches my eye as I pass him. It's enough. He makes his excuses and follows me, grabbing my hand as I reach the door.

“I just need some air, Sasha. It's okay.”

“Like hell it is.” He cups my cheek and feels that it’s wet. “Who made you fucking cry? I’ll kill them.”

I look into his eyes, and they blaze with vengeful wrath. Do I tell him? I have no idea what he’ll do, but there are a lot of people here. Maybe he’ll just threaten Carl and order him to leave like he did to Freddy?

I draw a deep breath. “My ex-foster father is here. He’s trying to blackmail me. He says he wants money, or he’ll tell you about what happened when I was younger.”

“You mean that shit I already know?” Sasha says. “Why didn’t you just tell him to fuck off?”

Good question, and in my heart, I know the answer. So does Sasha.

“You’re getting the hang of this life of ours, *moya zhena*,” he says, a devilish smile spreading across his face. “You *want* me to fuck him up. Don’t you?”

I nod, and he grabs me, shocking me with a deep, soulful kiss. He breaks away.

“Just as well,” he whispers. “Because that’s what’s gonna happen.”

My husband turns toward the man who took my childhood innocence and sold it to the highest bidder.



Sasha

Carl Ellis's neck is scrawny, like an under-fed chicken, and I'm sure I could choke him out with just one hand. As I approach, I recognize his wily strength and good instincts; he spins around, seeing my approach before I get within arm's length.

"I can't believe you had the gall to show up," I say. "I mean, I hoped you'd be as dumb as you are disgusting, but this takes the fucking cake."

"You invited me." Carl leans forward and smiles. "At least, you may as well have done. This isn't exactly a private affair. I just walked right in." He waves a hand at the room. "So, with all these well-dressed people here, I assume you won't want any drama. My business is with Josie, not you, so fuck off."

"My wife has no business that isn't mine also," I say. "And you'd better believe me when I say I'd be delighted to kill you right here in front of everyone. Did you expect Josie to still be that frightened little girl you used to abuse?" I step closer and lash out my arm like a whip, gripping his collar in my fist. "She has me now. I know all about her past and love her *more* for it. She's stronger than a piece of shit like you could ever understand."

Carl never anticipated that his leverage would evaporate in an instant. His eyes are wild as he realizes his grave error, and a thin scream escapes him, drawing the whole room's attention. The harpist stops playing, and only the man's cries reverberate around the vast space.

I turn him quickly and grab his neck from behind, bringing my knee up firmly into the small of his back. He stumbles as I walk him toward Josie, coughing as I hold him aloft by his throat. Josie draws herself up to her full height, her expression cold as I dump the wheezing loser at her feet.

The only thing that stops me from tearing this fucker to pieces is the knowledge that it's not my right. Not yet. My wife deserves to look into the eyes of the man who took her grieving, lonely young soul and tried to crush it. Carl Ellis needs to see Josie, unbeaten and unbowed, standing tall. Then I will drain the life from him if that's what she wants, and he'll die knowing

she wished it so.

“Don’t hurt me,” Carl whimpers. He sits up on his heels and looks at me as he speaks. “I’m an old man now. I’ll leave you alone. I was only joking anyway.”

Josie ducks down and looks at Carl’s face. He turns away, unwilling to look her in the eye, and I grab his neck again.

“You don’t get to look away,” I snarl. “Don’t beg me for your life. Beg *her*.”

Carl drags his eyes to Josie’s. “I was kind to you. Jane and I took you in when no one else would. Fed you, clothed you.” He holds out his hands. “I got nothing anymore. Doesn’t that matter to you? We were *family*.”

Josie closes her eyes. “You were *never* my family,” she says. “My mom was all I needed, and I lost her. I sure as hell won’t mourn you. No one will.” She gives him her back. “You’re finished, Carl.”

That’s enough for me, but I’m not prepared to shoot the man in the middle of the reception—there are children here, and we Kislevs know from past experience that murdering someone at a wedding trashes the ambiance. But there’s no way I’m outsourcing this one.

I drag Ellis onto his feet and march him to the door, catching Arman’s eye. He’s already on the phone, doing what he does best.

Ellis begins to scream in earnest as I shove him outside, and as the door swings closed behind us, I hear the music and hubbub again. Before us is the steep flight of steps that lead to the sidewalk.

We wait for a minute, and sure enough, a yellow taxi pulls up. No one pays any attention to the frightened Ellis as I bundle him onto the back seat, and I get in beside him, closing the door.

It takes less than a minute to squeeze the worthless life out of him. I had planned to shoot him, but this cabbie is a loyal and reliable waste-disposal expert, and I don’t want to make a mess of his vehicle. Or it could just be because I want to watch the filthy cunt suffer. I’ll admit, seeing the blood vessels in his eyes burst under pressure is satisfying. With a final shudder, Carl Ellis is dead, and it’s the best wedding present I could have asked for.

I throw the cabbie a roll of hundreds. “Get rid of him. Same protocol as usual. And thanks for getting here so fast.”

He takes the money with a deferential tilt of his head. “*Da*, Sasha. And congratulations, by the way.”



When I go back inside, the party is getting a little raucous. There’s nothing like knowing someone’s getting killed outside to drive people to drink, and trays of vodka shots are rapidly doing the rounds.

Josie runs into my arms, and I hold her tight to a massive cheer from the room. It’s our turn for the stupid shots-and-kissing Russian wedding tradition; the guests shout *gorko*, we kiss, and our love makes the vodka sweet instead of bitter. Or so they say. Who are we to disagree?

Josie looks up at me, her eyes shining. “Is he dead?” she asks, her voice a hoarse whisper. “Tell me that vicious bastard is dead, Sasha. Tell me you destroyed him.”

The cry goes up. “*Gorko!*”

I lean in close to her ear. “He’s not just dead. I’ve taken everything from him. He will have no grave, no resting place, no nothing. Roadkill has more dignity in passing than Carl Ellis. I promise you that.”

Someone yells again. “*Gorko!*”

I heed the call of tradition and lower my lips to hers. They taste salty from her tears, and as our guests applaud, I pull her close, cupping her cheek tenderly. Her hands cling to me like a frightened child. She seems so fragile, so broken.

The moment passes for everyone but us. As the party resumes in a happy blur of music and smiling faces, Josie and I remain close, lost in our own world.

“You’re a hero after all,” she murmurs.

I'm suddenly consumed by desire. All that exists is Josie—her beautiful face, her soft skin. Her strong yet gentle heart grieves as mine does. I want to heal her, hold her bruised soul, and guard it with my life. Everything I swore in our vows, I meant. The words are inadequate to express my feelings; I speak three languages, and none could ever say enough.

I take her hand, leading her silently up the stairs to the library mezzanine.



Josie

I wanted to be safe, but I never guessed I'd meet someone like Sasha, let alone have his protection. The man who speaks sweet words of love to me just snuffed out the life of my worst tormentor.

I know it's wrong. Yet deep down, I know the truth - justice is a blunted weapon, but Sasha is an engine of bloody payback. My husband is a man who would obliterate worlds and burn empires for my honor, like a king in some mystical epic. His vengeance has teeth and claws, and the heady mix of danger and passion keeps me burning for him.

No one seems to notice as we steal up the stairs and between the bookshelves. It's dark up here, a million dust motes suspended in the still air like a galaxy. Despite the hubbub below, it feels like the universe has been shrunk down, and there's only us in it.

Sasha is already breathing heavily. He pulls me into a narrow alley between the shelves and pins me between his arms. Then his lips are on mine, his kisses feverish.

"You belong to me," he says, his breath hot on my neck. "No other man will dare touch you. And those who hurt you in the past are on borrowed time. You need only point them out to me, and it's all over. I'll build you a palace out of their fucking bones if that's what you want."

"What I want is *you*," I murmur. I grab his hips, pulling him closer. "Here, now."

"Can you stay quiet, *zlotse*?" He slides a hand behind me and plucks at the buttons, undoing them expertly. "Because if not, I have ways to help."

Sasha's hand nudges the small of my back, making me arch toward him. He bites my neck gently, and I stifle a moan.

"You're having trouble already." He wraps his strong fingers around my throat, my pulse hammering against his palm. "Is my hand enough to choke you into silence? Or do I need to shove your mouth onto my cock and shut you up that way?"

What a choice. I'm about to tell him either way works for me when he tugs my dress, exposing my breasts. I gasp as the chilly air covers my skin in goosebumps. Sasha holds my gaze as he grips my neck tighter. He pinches my nipple firmly, and his hold on my windpipe reduces my response to a wheezing squeak.

I should hate this, but I don't. He knows damn well I'm hot for him, not just because we had a beautiful, emotional wedding ceremony but because he killed an evil man with his bare hands. I want a bit of that ruthlessness for myself.

Sasha chuckles. His hips are crushed to mine, the bookcase unyielding at my back. He's hard against me, and as he continues to play with my tight nipples, my pussy throbs in response. He takes a step back, staring hungrily at my breasts before leaning forward to lick one little pink bud. His tongue moves with an intensity that sends sparks of arousal shooting through me, but although I'm squirming against him, he never lets up his hold on my neck.

"You're perfect," he whispers against my skin. "How did a guy like me get lucky enough to meet a fucking angel like you?"

I don't reply; I can't, not with his vice-like grip cutting off my words. He releases my neck suddenly and grabs my dress, lifting it to my waist. I gasp, and he lifts me off the ground, nuzzling my sore neck before capturing my lips in a deep, passionate kiss. He gives a tortured growl as I wrap my legs around his waist, grinding against his erection.

"That does it," he says. "I need to get at you, *moya zhená*. I'm hard as fuck, and your slutty little pussy deserves to be ruined. God knows that's what's gonna happen."

Sasha sits me down on a nearby desk and moves between my thighs, pushing them apart. I shudder as he finds my damp panties, and when he nudges his finger against my clit, I almost cry out. The tiny button is hopelessly oversensitive, primed by his attention on my nipples, and my pussy is so juicy and ready for him. He knows it, too. A smirk of satisfaction curls his lip, and he pulls my panties down and off, tucking them in his pants pocket.

"I'm keeping those," he says. "You're not getting them back tonight. When we return to the party, I'll enjoy knowing my beautiful wife is a mess under

her wedding dress.”

“You filthy bastard,” I hiss as he slips a finger inside me. “What if I refuse?”

“Refuse what?” Sasha presses deeper, and I drop my head back as his thumb settles on my clit. “My cock? My come? Or to do what I tell you?” He curls his finger, finding the sweet spot, and I bite my lip hard, trying not to cry out. “I can only assume you *mean* to make me mad. Because you want what I’ve got, and you’ll take it all like a good little girl.”

His face is suddenly right in front of me. I stare, my mouth hanging open as his heavy-lidded eyes pierce me.

“Look at me.” He picks up his rhythm, his fingers surging in and out of my slick pussy, the pad of his thumb still massaging my swollen clit. “Tell me you want my cock inside you.”

I don’t even bother to argue. I’m desperate to feel that hot, relentless stretch that only my husband’s girth can provide. He’s right—I want everything, and although I love resisting him, I can’t do it for long.

“I want you inside me,” I gasp. “Just give me your cock, Sasha. I can’t wait any more. You’re driving me out of my damn mind.”

Without another word, Sasha withdraws his hand, and I moan with frustration. He undoes his zipper, freeing his erection, and I think he’s gonna plunge straight inside me. But he doesn’t.

Beside the desk is a leather armchair. Sasha sits and leans back, his cock sticking lewdly out of his pants.

“Come here and ride me. Now.”

I scramble off the desk, but he takes my hips in his hands as I reach him. “Turn around and face the other way,” he says.

My dress bunches at my waist, very much in the way. Then I remember that the mermaid skirt and bustier are, in fact, separate pieces. I wriggle out of the dress and kick it aside before assuming the position, bending my knees until I feel the smooth tip of Sasha’s dick against my aching pussy.

I'll never get used to him. The hot metal of his piercing feels like fire, but it's so good. Sasha teases me for a moment, holding my body up and away from him so I can't take him all the way inside me.

"Stop it!" I say too loudly. "Just give it to me, you—"

Sasha's long fingers shove my words back into my mouth. The force pushes me back against him, and he pulls my leg up with his free hand, opening me up to him.

"Shhh." He slides slowly inside my tightness, hissing through his teeth as he forges deeper. "Shut the fuck up and take it. I know you can. You're doing so well."

I whimper, saliva running down my chin as he fucks his fingers into my throat. He's so rough and nasty, yet tender. How the hell can he be both?

"Get them good and wet," he says. He bites my neck, digging his teeth into the tendon. "Because they're going in your ass."

I balk a little. Despite my many years as a call girl, anal was the one thing I wouldn't do. I always wanted to keep some part of my body unsullied, but that was before. I never thought I'd meet a man who had to consume every inch of me. A man who would love me.

Sasha rolls his hips, pulling out entirely before slamming back inside. I reach for my clit, and he laughs, leaning back further to get deeper inside me.

"That's it, *zlotse*. You come for me now. I'm not done with you yet, but you need some relief, don't you, baby?"

I nod, and he removes his fingers from my mouth. Instead, he grips my jaw, turning my face to his to silence me with a deep, probing kiss. I tug his lip ring with my teeth, and he responds with a firm thrust, spearing my pussy and setting my deepest nerves alight. My climax is already building, and I chase it down, rubbing my clit as I reach my peak. Sasha thrusts his hand into my hair, suppressing my screams of pleasure with his mouth until I'm quivering and panting, his breath mingling with mine.



Sasha

Jesus fucking *Christ*, do I want to come.

After all the romance of the day, murdering Carl Ellis was something of a reset. Although I surprised myself with the intensity of my feelings at the altar, I have ways of expressing myself that would never make it into the vows. Flowers and poetic words are all well and good, but I'm a guy whose strength of feeling is best demonstrated by railing the woman I love until she's a whimpering wreck. And I'm not done yet.

"You love it, don't you?" I whisper in Josie's ear. "Your pussy craves me. And who am I?" I pull her hair gently as I shift my hips, sliding my still rock-hard cock out of her. "I'm a murderer. A man who kills and would die for *you*. I'm already damned, so I fuck you like the demon I am. I know for sure that Heaven couldn't compare to feeling you come, so I say Hell is well worth it."

Josie looks punch drunk. I push her onto her feet and turn her around, arranging her until she's kneeling on the chair, her gorgeous ass in the air.

"Get that head down." I push until her face rests on the backrest. "You're gonna need to bite that so you don't scream."

Josie has recovered enough to speak. "I can't," she says. "Let me get myself together. You're too much."

I ignore her and grab the cheeks of her ass, bending down so I can spear her tight asshole with my tongue. Josie gives an almost soundless scream, clamping her teeth into the backrest as I open her up, my saliva mixing with her juice to make a beautiful mess. I work two fingers into her pussy, gratified to find her inner walls clutching desperately.

"Your sweet little cunt disagrees with you, *zlotse*." I withdraw my fingers, rubbing them over her tightest hole, and she moans. "And I need more lubrication if I'm gonna get in here, too."

I reach forward and shove my fingers in her mouth again, and this time, I push further and harder than before. Josie splutters, her throat constricting,

and she gives me what I want, coughing thick, viscous saliva onto my hand.

“That’s it.” I wrench my hand out of her mouth, and she heaves a deep breath. I massage her ass, getting her good and slippery before positioning my fingertip.

“Sasha.” Josie’s voice is harsh. “I...I never let anyone in my ass before. Please go easy.”

I didn’t expect that. My cock, already agonizingly engorged, seems to gain another inch.

“In that case, I’m not gonna fuck it now,” I say, slapping her butt cheek with the flat of my palm. “But I am gonna pound your pussy and stuff your ass with my fingers at the same time. I think you’re the kind of greedy slut who wants both holes destroyed. Am I right?”

“Yes.” Josie rolls her head, and I broach her tightness, the tip of my finger slipping smoothly inside the first ring of muscle. “I don’t know why I’m willing to let you do whatever you want, but I am. God, that feels good.”

I add a second finger, and she bucks her hips slightly, hissing through her teeth. “I know why,” I say, pressing my weight behind my hand as I ease into her depths. “It’s because you like to be a good girl for me. I say I’m gonna do something, and you say yes, like the precious, beautiful fuck doll you are.” I tease her pussy with my cock, rubbing the head over her still-sensitive clit. “You’re doing so well, baby. Once I get my cock in you, I’m gonna fuck you damn hard.” My fingers are entirely inside her asshole now, and she bites the chair again, bracing her arms against what she knows is coming. “You ready for what I got for you?”

I don’t wait for an answer. I slap my hand down hard on the flesh of her buttock, gripping it firmly as I thrust my cock into her pussy. I meet no resistance at all—she’s so wet, her heat clutching at me as I move my fingers in time, working her spasming little asshole.

Josie is doing all she can to stay quiet, moaning and surging against the chair. I lean into her, finding another gear, and she reaches between her legs, her fingertip moving over her clit. My climax is gathering in my core like a storm, and a wicked thought occurs to me.

“Come for me, *moya zhená*.” I slap her ass again, harder than before. “Do what I fucking tell you. I’m not a patient man, and I wanna fill you up.” I spank her roughly, my palm stinging from the impact. “Now, I said!”

Josie buries her face in her arm and squeals, her pussy twitching as she orgasms. Her convulsions send me past the point of no return, and I pull out of her pussy and ass, covering her in ropes of come. Before she can come down from her high, I shove my cock deep into her twitching asshole, my come adding just the right amount of additional lubrication, and I enjoy a moment of her tight heat before pulling free. I lean forward and kiss the back of her neck.

“Just a taste.”

Josie is shaking. “You are a disgrace, Sasha. But that was amazing. I can’t believe no one heard us!”

I hand her skirt to her. “Or they *did* hear and decided not to interrupt. I’m not interested in sharing you.”

She takes the skirt, then holds out her hand again. “My panties, if you please.”

I rearrange myself and do up my zipper. “I do *not* please, actually,” I say, folding my arms. “We are going to go back to our guests in a minute. You can fix your hair and your face, but everyone will see the bruises already coming up on your neck.” I take the panties from my pocket, folding them into a neat square. “What they won’t see is my come running down your legs. But I’ll know.”

Josie narrows her eyes but can’t resist an indulgent smile. “Would it do any good if I argued?”

I remove the silk handkerchief from my vest pocket and tuck the folded panties in their place, shaking my head as I do so.

“Nope. Now, let’s get back. We have to keep up appearances, you know?”



Back at the party, I note the absence of Sal Tosca, but I spot Igor. Josie is safely wrapped up in conversation with Morgana, and from their sudden peals of laughter as I pass, I guess the secret of the missing panties is a secret no longer.

Igor is picking at the buffet, his face a characterless mask. The man is no more joyous or dour at a wedding or a funeral. His demeanor is the same at every gathering, regardless of the occasion, but that's his way. He's seen too much shit in his time.

"A moving ceremony," he says to me. "You really love that girl, don't you?"

Oleg falls in behind me in the buffet line, talking to Igor as if I'm not there. "So? She's a call girl, married to a high-ranking bratva man. I never thought I'd see the day." He picks up a king prawn skewer and sniffs it before putting it back. "Disgusting."

"The food or my wife?" I snarl. "You don't think I'll beat the shit out of you in front of everyone? I already killed a man today. My blood is up."

Igor puts a hand on my shoulder as he speaks to Oleg. "You were invited today despite your insufferable rudeness. Sasha adores his woman. Surely you can see that as well as I can?" He waves dismissively at the old man. "Get out of here. I'll take this up with you separately."

Oleg stomps away, and Igor keeps a firm hand on my shoulder to keep me from following him. As much as I'd like to kneecap Oleg, this isn't the place or time, and to be honest, he's not the person. If I made a list of people I can't get away with maiming, it would be short, but *komissiya* members would have to be right at the top.

"Anyway," he continues, "I'm sure you'll be glad to come along to Sal Tosca's home tomorrow morning and put this nonsense behind you. And maybe you Kislevs will think a little harder about your choices in future?"

I can't help myself. "I don't indulge in regret, Igor. Especially not where my wife is concerned."

"Really?" Igor helps himself to a bread roll. "My life is made up of little else." He turns away, throwing a parting remark over his shoulder. "I suggest you enjoy life's joys while you can, young man. In our world, things can

unravel without warning, and when they do, your actions may come back to haunt you.”



The next morning...

Sasha

I walk through the wrought-iron gates of Sal Tosca's mansion and up the marble steps that lead to the front entrance. The trimmed hedges are adorned with lights, and I make a mental note to get on Vlad's case about putting up some Christmas decor of our own. Papa never allowed it, which is a good enough reason to go all out and turn the place into a goddamn grotto. I ignore the camera mounted on the trellis and ring the doorbell.

I just want this over with. I'll let the smug old bastard enjoy his moment, then leave. If he wants to look like a big guy in front of Igor, that's fine. It's as close as he'll get to any serious power in his lifetime.

I only want to return to my warm bed and my beautiful wife. She has dreams, and I will spare no expense to make them come true. I don't care who I have to bribe, maim, or destroy to see Josie happy and safe.

The old oak doors creak open, and there he is, Sal Tosca, a mountain of a man with a grin as wide as his waistline. He greets me with a clap on the back, meaty hands squeezing my shoulder.

"Ah, Sasha!" he booms. "You've done well, my boy. I appreciate the picture you sent me—very artful. Larry never looked better."

I shrug his hand away. His friendliness is disarming; I'm not used to it. "It was a proof of death, not a keepsake. Is Igor here yet?"

Sal shakes his head. "Nah. He's late, of course. Come on in and have a seat while we wait."

I make my way into Sal's study. The room is cloaked in shadows, dimly lit by the orange glow of a solitary desk lamp, and I wonder idly why he has the drapes closed. A sense of unease gnaws at me as I sit in one of the leather chairs. Sal sits behind the desk, resting his elbows on the mahogany.

“You know, Sasha,” he says, “there’s something you should know about Larry.”

I’m about to ask what he means when I hear the sound of footsteps outside and the front door opening. It can only be Igor. No one else is arrogant or connected enough to waltz unbidden into the home of a mafia don.

I lean forward, my curiosity piqued. “What do you mean?”

Sal gives a malevolent laugh. “Didn’t you recognize him? Back in the day, he was known as Commissioner Webster.”

My body reacts before I can process the information, and I double over as though I’ve been sucker-punched.

Webster. Is he the guy that—

“Yep.” Sal is laughing now, his belly rolling. “It’s been a few years, but he was the man when you were a kid. Cleaned up this city and ran out all the crazy-ass scum who didn’t have honor or rules. He laid the foundations for the relationship between organized crime and law enforcement—hell, he brought *peace*—and you,” his voice breaks with mirth, “shot him down like a dog!”

My heart drops, plunging into the depths of my chest, a cold sweat breaking across my brow. The room tightens around me, and it becomes hard to breathe.

I’ve broken one of the most fundamental rules in our world—never go to war with the police. No, it’s worse than that. I haven’t *just* broken the rule. I have set my whole world on fire. The consequences are not just mine to bear; my family, my empire, and the Kislevs will be shattered and cast out by the *komissiya*, our name dragged through the mud.

People will die for this. People I love.

“Sal, you can’t be serious,” I stammer, the gravity of what I’ve done weighing down my voice. “Why? What about Giulia, the affair?”

“You’re so dumb. Obviously, it was all bullshit.” Sal sits back in his chair and points at me. “You humiliated my daughter. More importantly, you

humiliated *me*. Did you really think I would let you get away with that?”

I hear the study door open behind me, and I turn to see Igor. He’s severe-looking in a woolen overcoat, imposing despite his age.

I’m glad to see him. He’ll be furious when he hears what I’ve done, but it’s a frame. He knows I’d never do something like this intentionally. It isn’t how it looks, and when I explain, the *komissiya* will stand up for me.

I rise to my feet. “Igor. Tosca set me up. There was a guy, an ex-cop—”

Igor moves incredibly quickly, so much so that I don’t notice the pistol in his hand until it roars to life. I’m sure I’m about to keel over dead, but it’s Sal Tosca who falls. His torso slumps over the desk before sliding across the polished surface and onto the carpet.

“Jesus Christ,” I say, peering at the dead man’s body. “You already knew.”

I turn back to Igor and realize the pistol is still in his hand, leveled at me.

“So,” he says, his voice laced with malice, “you killed Lawrence Webster. You were always careless, Sasha. Never paid any mind to who you hurt. You just do whatever you want without a care for the consequences. Well, now it’s time to pay up.”

I wrack my brain, trying to unravel his cryptic words. What the hell is he talking about?

“How’s Signora G?” Igor asks suddenly. He gestures at me to sit, and I lower myself into the chair, never taking my eyes off him. “Her name is Marina. I knew her back when your Papa and I were small-timers. I knew her *very* well, in fact.”

Sal’s blood soaks into the pile, spreading near my feet. I clear my throat. “She’s fine. Memory not so good these days, but she’s bearing up.”

“Good.” Igor smiles. “She’s the woman I should have married. But my mother was furious with me when she found out about the kid. Catholic, you see.”

I feel a dull thud of anxiety in my chest as my thoughts organize themselves. Does he mean Rocco?

Igor is speaking as much to himself as to me. “Back then, illegitimate kids were all the rage, but I was meant to marry a woman of a good family, not a poor immigrant girl with beautiful eyes but no prospects.”

He sighs. “I loved her with everything I had, and the boy too. Your father was the only person who knew about their connection to me because I *trusted* him. I thought he was my friend.”

More fool him. Sergey Kislev was nobody’s friend.

“I got on the wrong side of a nasty up-and-coming mob guy and confided in Sergey. He saw his chance to make his name and went straight to the man, offering to make an example of me.” Igor’s eyes glitter in the low light, and I see he’s holding back tears. “You know the rest, don’t you?”

I shake my head slowly. Whatever Igor thinks, I still have no idea what’s happening. His brow furrows as he sees my confusion.

“Your father went out in a stolen car one night, looking for Rocco. He knew where to find him, didn’t he, Sasha? Because you told him where to look.” He swipes angrily at his damp eyes before waving the pistol again, taking a step closer as he does so. “Rocco looked up to you. Where you went, he went. Isn’t that so? You lured my son to a prearranged spot, and Sergey rolled up and blew him away. An innocent boy, dead, for nothing more than kudos and a pat on the back.”

He’s wrong. So, so wrong.

“It didn’t happen that way, Igor. Who told you this?”

“Your father told me himself when he was dying.” He closes his eyes for a second. “For so many years, I called him *tovarishch*—my comrade. But he laughed in my face and said he killed my son.” His face twists as ugly memories wash over him. “I didn’t know who murdered Rocco, so I had to abandon the boy’s mother. I couldn’t risk her safety. I looked in on her occasionally, but only from a distance.”

“So you know I took care of her. Doesn’t that count for anything?”

“Guilt.” The word drops from Igor’s lips like a dead weight. “You know what you did and think you can make up for it. You can’t, but what I have planned

will go some way to even the score.”

“I feel guilt, but not for the reasons you think,” I say quickly, holding out my hands. “You want someone to blame. I see that. But I loved Rocco and hated my father. I would never have agreed to help Sergey—”

“It doesn’t matter.” Igor’s tone is ice-cold, but I hear the pain in his words. “I couldn’t hurt your father by then, and your family has always had too much power for me to tear it down. Not unless a weak link appeared.” He smiles thinly. “And that’s *you*, isn’t it? Just as it always was. You let some woman mess with your head, and next thing you know, you owed Tosca a debt. It didn’t take much to convince him to use that debt to ruin you and your family, not after you made a laughing stock of him.”

I’m starting to understand. Tosca thought he would get some kind of compensation—assets, money, whatever—in return for setting in motion a chain reaction that could lead to war.

I don’t need to ask who else knows about this dirty plot. It’s only Igor and me, for now, at least. The only other witness lies beside me, his corpse gurgling quietly as it bleeds out.

“So here are your choices,” Igor says. He sits on the edge of the desk, the gun resting casually on his knee. “Behind door number one is this. You can return to your brother and tell him what you’ve done. He will no doubt be willing to protect you. Still, when I disclose your crime and formally excommunicate your family from the *komissiya*’s protection, it will be open season on *you*,” he jabs a finger at me, “your family, and everything you’ve built. Your former allies and rivals will distance themselves at best or team up with the law to see you all destroyed.” He shrugs. “Not great. Are you interested in hearing what’s behind door number two?”

I nod.

“Tell your brother to cede his leadership to you. He and the rest of your rotten family can keep their lives, but they have to leave the city and never return. I’ll keep a close eye on them, of course, to make sure they aren’t planning any heroics. You get to be pakhan instead, but you’ll do what I tell you to do.” He smiles. “You’ll be getting back to the nasty stuff you used to do, Sasha. Won’t that be fun?”

My pulse hammers in my ears. Vlad will never hand me and the bratva over without a fight, but the alternative is unthinkable.

“One more thing,” Igor says, a sneer curling his lips. “Your wife stays. I saw how you looked at her. I wanted to steal your empire, but I didn’t think I could break your soul, too. Not until she showed up.” He gives a bark of vicious laughter. “You’re such a fool. Put one foot wrong, and I’ll make your wife wish she’d never met you.”

I drop my head into my hands, defeated.

I never saw this coming. I made my family vulnerable, and had it just been about the Toscas, we could have dealt with it. But Igor’s hatred came from somewhere deep and poisonous, and like a cobra, he remained coiled and hidden, waiting for his chance to strike. If I don’t comply, he will see to it that I’m blamed for Sal’s death, too, and with everything that’s happened recently, that’s an easy sell.

“Go home,” Igor says, holding open the door. “You have twenty-four hours to get your act together and do what you’re told. After that, everything and everyone you love is ashes.”



Sasha

When I get home, it's still early, and Josie is asleep. I lurk in the quiet spaces of the house, determined not to be alone with her until I can calm the panic running through me.

The day passes in a blur of visitors. Many people come by the house to drop off wedding gifts and give us their blessing, and Josie and I receive them gracefully. If anyone notices the absence of Sal Tosca, they don't mention it, and I wonder about Claudia. She may be locked away somewhere in the Tosca compound, awaiting the whims of Igor.

I'm losing my mind with fear, but I can't tell Josie what's happening. We have a running itinerary of guests today, as is traditional, and there's no time for revelations and recriminations. The more my wife knows, the more danger she's in, but that's not why I can't bring myself to tell her the truth. It's because I can't bear to see the look on her face when she sees I was right all along.

I'm not the man to save her. All I wanted to do was protect her, and I couldn't. She'll never be safe again, and there's no way I'm worth that.



Josie knows I'm not okay, and when the evening draws in, she quietly withdraws for a while, leaving me in the downstairs lounge. I kill time, nursing a drink and my meandering thoughts.

When my father was young, he was nobody. He always told us kids that he'd clawed his way up from the gutter, and his father's ruthless commitment to crime put the family on the map. I don't remember my grandfather too well, but I do remember him encouraging our father to beat us harder. Papa believed in coldness and calculated pragmatism and thought love was for idiots. I can believe he would hurt a friend, even going as far as to murder an innocent kid.

Papa spoke of Igor sometimes. Said he lost his edge and became a mob lawyer instead of a pakhan. He never married but did enough favors in his long and ignoble legal career to be elected to lead our *komissiya*. It was believed he had no vested interests in any one family and would, therefore, adjudicate the bratva's business fairly.

And maybe that was true. Until my father, spiteful coward that he was, made a deathbed confession not to ease his conscience but to drink in the pain of a man he'd known for many years. The grieving father who believed his boy had died in place of me by accident.

But why did Papa make Igor believe I'd helped kill my best friend? I would never—

The memory comes flooding back with painful clarity. My father shouting at me as I headed for the door.

“Sasha! Where are you going, boy?”

“To meet Rocco,” I replied, slowing down but not stopping. I never knew when I would need to make a run for it. “We’re just hanging on by the park.”

Papa put down his paper and glared at me. “Where exactly?”

I swallowed hard. “The south gate, near his house.”

“So if I come and check in ten minutes, that’s where I’ll find you?”

He used to do this sometimes. Demand to know where we’d be and threaten to test us by showing up. It was a pointless power play, as he’d never done it, but Vlad and I were too afraid to defy him. We’d only need to get it wrong once, and we’d be in hell.

I would need to stay in that area for at least an hour, just to be sure, but it would be okay. Rocco liked to laugh at my questionable soccer abilities, and we could kill a lot of time smoking and talking big.

“Yes, Papa,” I said, hating the shake in my voice. “That’s where we’ll be. Just on the street, kicking a ball.”

I left before my father could say anything more.

Papa knew where to find Rocco because he knew where to find *me*. But it wasn't like that. I didn't know what my bastard of a father planned to do or who Rocco really was.

I feel weak and stupid, just like I did as a kid when Papa intimidated me. I sit in the armchair and set my drink on the table, the painful reality of my life suddenly impossible to bear.

My dearest friend died because of me, but not in the way I always believed. The guilt I've carried for decades was nothing compared to this. If I'd walked out the door and never said a word, my father wouldn't have known where to find us that day.

Rationally, I know it wouldn't have mattered. There would have been other chances to get to Rocco. But on *that* day, it was me who made it happen.

Those I love are at risk of destruction, and it's all my fault. I recklessly revealed my weakness and gave Igor his chance at vengeance.

One way or another, I have to make my beloved family leave. I must convince Vlad to abandon everything he's worked for and run away. He's not the kind of man to do that—he won't let me be anyone's lackey.

Love set this whole ugly business in motion. My love for Josie and my family is on one side, and Igor's love for his son is on the other. How could something so beautiful be responsible for such savage chaos?

The maelstrom of agony in my mind suddenly settles, and the solution, elegant yet horrific, becomes all too clear. But I have to lose myself in Josie for a little longer before everything goes to hell.

Just one more night.



Josie

When Sasha comes to our room, the concern I've spent the whole day trying to deny threatens to engulf me. He looks suddenly exhausted, as though every lousy night's sleep he ever had caught up with him all at once.

We stood side by side today, shaking people's hands, accepting blessings, and being gracious hosts. But something has shifted beneath the surface of our lives, and I can't put my finger on it. After Sasha appeased Tosca, I thought we would be free and could finally embrace a future that had felt like a pipe dream. But now, as Sasha slumps heavily onto the mattress, I'm beginning to doubt everything.

"Sasha." I roll over to face him. "Is everything okay?"

He turns to me, and there's a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes, a shadow that wasn't there before.

"Of course, *zlotse*. Everything's fine."

But it's not. I can feel it in the air, see it in his stony expression. He seems like a man divided, pulled in opposite directions, though he's trying to mask it.

"You don't *look* fine."

His eyes dart away, unable to meet mine. Who *is* this man? Where's the arrogance, the sardonic remarks, the warmth in his velvet voice? My husband may not always think things through but faces problems with his ever-present wit and quick, sure decisions. He always knows what to do, but now he seems lost, and it frightens me.

He's my protector, my solid foundation, the one who never wavers. But right now, it's as though the solid ground below us is crumbling away.

"Please." I reach for his arm, feeling the tension in his muscles, every sinew taut. "You can tell me."

He looks at me, and I see the ambivalence in him. It's as though he's on the verge of saying something, of letting the truth spill out, but then he closes his eyes and pulls away from me.

"It's just bratva business," he says, his tone flat. "You need to leave it alone."

His words are simple, but the dismissal cuts deep.

"Sasha, if this affects you so much, I need to understand. I can't just stand by and watch you suffer."

"Not your call," he says. He gets to his feet and removes his shirt, popping a button in his haste. "If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen. You're safe now. Tosca won't be a problem, and you can do what the fuck you like."

"You're really doing this," I say softly, fighting to hold back tears. "I don't believe you mean that. After everything you put me through, you're pushing me away?"

He stares at me for a moment before turning away. His shoulders sag, and I fight a surge of panic.

Maybe we're not safe after all. Something happened this morning's meeting that left Sasha rattled, but he's closed up tight. The wall I worked so hard to break down is taller and more impenetrable than ever. As he turns back to face me, I see the tortured face of a man who loves me but wishes he didn't.

But the more he pushes me away, the more I want to understand whatever's tormenting him. I'm not a delicate flower, and I won't be sidelined—he made me marry him, but it's so much more than that now. He made me *fall* for him, and despite his complex, intense nature, I want to stay by his side.

You're his lighthouse, Josie. Dulcie's words echo in my thoughts. His sanctuary.

I climb out of bed and go to him. He's frozen in place, his eyes willing me to keep my distance, but I ignore his body language and close the space, putting my arms around his waist. He tenses but doesn't attempt to resist, and I press my body to his. Maybe my body under his hands will exorcise whatever demon is on his back and bring the loving man I know back to me.

“Only you could say and do the things you did yesterday, only to be a different person today,” I murmur.

I kiss his collarbone, and he flinches. I decide to go for broke; it’s risky, but any reaction is better than this.

“You know,” I continue, reaching up to smooth his hair with my palm, “you’re probably right. Maybe this has all been a stupid mistake. I’d be better off with a nice man. One who makes gentle love to me, asks permission, takes it slow—”

Sasha’s frustration breaks through, and he grabs my throat with a roar. His other hand flies to my ass, smashing my hips to his, and I feel his hardness already digging into my core.

“You belong to me, and you fucking know it,” he breathes, walking me backward toward the bed. “How can you say this shit to me, Josie? You don’t know what I’ve done. What I still have to do.”

What the hell does he mean?

I get no opportunity to ask. He squeezes my neck, and as my mouth drops open, he lowers his face to mine, breathing in my gasp. I moan as he kisses me deeply, working his tongue into my mouth, and my body goes limp with longing.

“I’m ruining my life,” he whispers against my lips. “Yours too. How did we get here, Josie? What have I done to you?”

His words disturb me. There’s a desperation to his movements, too; he grips me too tightly, and his kisses are too devouring, but I can’t get enough. It’s as though he wants to possess me enough to last a lifetime. It wasn’t like this even yesterday when his touch felt like fire. This time, it’s an inferno, raging dangerously out of control.

We fall back into the pillows. My body quivers with anticipation as he towers over me, his eyes blazing with a hunger that’s both beautiful and terrifying.

Sasha takes my nightshirt in his hands, shredding it to ribbons with a ripping sound. I want to protest his roughness, but the words won’t come. I start to tremble, partly out of fear but mostly because I want this wildness. His are

the only hands in the world that can make me feel safe, but tonight his control feels like it's hanging by a thread, and the tension makes everything feel heightened, focused.

Sasha lifts my wrists above my head, pinning them with one hand. He takes his time, strategizing his next move as he surveys my naked body inch by inch. His gaze feels like a caress, and soon, I'm squirming beneath him in desperate longing.

Finally, he moves in for the kill. His free hand slides down the length of my body till it rests between my legs, and there's no holding back now. He works me expertly, his movements rigorous enough to make me cry out in pleasure.

Through the haze of sensation, I'm aware that he's not saying anything. I expect to hear him utter the dirty words that quicken my reactions and hasten me toward my climax, but no. His movements become more urgent and desperate as he moves lower down my body, planting passionate, bruising kisses along the way until he reaches my pussy.

I wait for him to speak—to demand that I beg, to tell me I look beautiful, *anything*—but still, he's silent. Instead, he parts my pussy lips with his fingers and plunges his tongue into my wetness.

The sensation is overwhelming. Sasha's tongue circles and teases until I feel like I'm about to burst with ecstasy. Every move is calculated and calibrated to take me higher towards sweet oblivion. I'd be lost if it wasn't for Sasha's look of cold determination. No matter how much pleasure he brings me, his eyes remain distant and disconnected from the moment.

I feel out of control, unable to resist the orgasm he's determined to force on me, but I don't just want the release. I want *him*. The Sasha I know and love. The ego, dirty mouth, and warm, sensual body. It's as though he's left a part of him somewhere else, and it's scaring me.

“Sasha-”

“Shh.” He redoubles his efforts, his tongue flicking against my clit, teasing and probing as my back arches in response. His fingers find their way inside me, alternately coaxing and demanding, and I come apart under his touch, screaming out in pleasure until the room is spinning around me.

I sit up, reaching for him before I come down from the high. I must close the gulf between us and regain the intimacy we shared in the library. Those stolen moments when he gave me all he had and more.

Sasha doesn't resist as I push him onto his back and reach for his zipper, freeing his erection. I throw my leg over his body and straddle his hips before pressing my slick entrance against him. My body shudders with anticipation as I lower myself onto his length, slowly at first, then faster and harder, pushing into every corner of me as we collide.

I ride him like a woman possessed. It's a frantic, panicked feeling; he's inside me, yet may as well be galaxies away. His eyes are closed, and although he's holding my hips, it's not his signature firm grip. His piercing hits me deep, drawing a throaty moan from him, but his eyes remain closed.

"Look at me," I say, my voice strained with torment. "Goddammit, Sasha! Where are you? Why aren't you with me?"

Sasha's eyes fly open, and he frowns. I slow down, sliding my pussy down onto him as I lean forward. I press my breast to his chest, my face level with his. Our lips are only an inch apart, but kissing him doesn't feel right. I'm suddenly reminded of all those horrible nights I spent with men who were paying to use me, and the memory tips me into fury.

"How dare you fuck me like I'm nothing," I whisper.

"You're crazy." Sasha's words drip with wrath. "You *knew* I wanted you. I never once thought less of you for your past. I was waiting for the right time, and you left the city only to hook up with some loser." He shifts his hips, pulling free of me before pushing back inside, and I gasp. "I brought you here, and I'm sorry. You said I used you to get out of the marriage—maybe you're right. But I'm in love with you, and that love will lay waste to my entire life and yours." He winds a hand through my hair, his fingers digging into my scalp. "I can't bear to think about it," he murmurs. "So I won't."

I don't understand, but his tone says it all, and I cannot find the words to reply. I want to stop everything and make him talk to me, but it's too late. Sasha is already shifting his weight, holding tightly onto my hair while his free hand wraps my waist, maneuvering me deftly. We rock together in perfect synchronization, and soon, we're gripping each other desperately as

our movements become more frantic.

I never knew it could be like this. It's as phenomenal as ever, but there's something else there, too: an underlying fear that if I let go completely, it will all slip away like smoke on the wind.

When I think things can't get any more intense, Sasha pulls my hair hard, dragging my head onto his shoulder and pinning me in place. He breathes harshly into my ear as he bucks his hips and gathers pace, pounding me until my pussy is burning up with the sheer onslaught. It's as though he's trying to diminish my hold on his heart by dominating my body, but he can't fuck his way through the fear. Where is this coming from?

My second orgasm rushes over me like a raging river—unstoppable, uncontrollable, and more powerful than anything I have experienced before. I scream out Sasha's name as I climax, my entire body shaking with the force of it. He snarls like an animal and comes deep inside me, the tension draining from his limbs as he empties his pent-up stress into my quivering body.

We collapse together in a sweaty heap, both of us exhausted beyond words, and Sasha nudges me onto the mattress beside him. I lie there for a few minutes, trying to piece together my thoughts as the aftershocks surge through me.

I *have* to make him open up to me. If all he wanted was to see this through, clear his debt to Tosca, and have a marriage in name only—well, okay. He didn't have to pretend he cared to get me to play along. Did he really think I couldn't have just faked it, too? I mean, for fuck's sake. That was my *job*.

I turn to Sasha, ready to face the music, but his breathing is already deep and steady. He fell asleep without a word. Obviously, I could wake him, but my eyelids are heavy, too, and a little voice needles me in the back of my head.

Put it off until later. Wouldn't you rather wait a little longer to discover what a fool you've been?

Consciousness fades away, and as I always do when I'm afraid, I dream of my mom.



Five hours later...

Sasha

Beside me, Josie sleeps with the peace I may never again feel. What bliss it must be.

I already knew damn well that I would break her heart tonight, but I fucked her anyway. That's a violation, and I'm sickened by myself. Is there such a thing as emotional rape? Because she'd never have let me touch her tonight if she'd known what I was gonna do.

The thought sits deep in my ribs like a heavy weight. I cannot bear to lie beside my wife any longer, and the dawn is fast approaching.

I'm out of time.

Vlad doesn't sleep well. He worries about Morgana, and the slightest sigh from her wakes him. Inevitably, he can be found at his desk in the early hours, trying to bore himself back to sleep with paperwork.

If I'm right and he *is* awake, it has to be now. I can no longer stall the inevitable.

I dress silently, my limbs leaden, and head downstairs. With every step, the pressure on my chest grows heavier, the burden becoming unbearable.



The light from under Vlad's office door slices through the gloom, and I pause to compose myself. The role I have to play is sinister and unfamiliar, and it cuts me to the core. What I'm about to do is gonna damn near kill me, but for my brother, my family, and my wife—my *love*—I'll do what has to be done. Just like always.

Vlad's face brightens when he sees me. When we were children, he shielded me from the cruelties of our father. He's a guardian who never wavers, and that quality will make him play into my hands now.

"*Brat.*" Vlad greets me with a smile. "What brings you here at this hour? Don't tell me you're here to help me with all this shit. You've never offered before."

With each word, the guilt inside me grows. My face twists into something malicious as I prepare to shatter the trust he's held for so long.

"Vlad," I begin, "we need to talk."

Vlad's smile fades into confusion. He knows something is amiss.

"What's going on, Sasha?"

Words alone are not enough. I gotta *sell* it. I must make my beloved older brother believe what I'm about to say is genuinely happening.

I sit, leaning back and fixing him with an arrogant sneer that feels alien. "You remember the old ways—the ruthless interests Papa used to build our empire? I've been thinking and decided that the only way to secure our future is to go back to our father's methods. The family needs a leader who isn't afraid to do what's necessary."

Vlad stops shuffling papers and cocks his head at me, his brow furrowed. "Sasha, what the fuck are you talking about? We left those days behind. We've built a life away from drugs and vice. You're the last person who should want to return to that—"

I cannot look him in the eye, so I cut him off with a callous tone. "I don't give a shit, Vlad. I'm sick of you always being the important one. Papa may have thought I was worthless, but Igor sees my potential. He and I have been planning to take control. We've decided it's time to return to what we used to do best. Back when Papa had a purpose for me and used my skills."

The pain seeping into Vlad's eyes is like a knife twisting in my gut, but I must press forward.

“You’ve grown weak.” I stand and square up to my brother. “We need someone stronger, willing to do whatever it takes to protect the family. And I’m sick of being your errand boy.”

I fucking hope he hits me. I hope he smashes me in the face, but looking at him now, he’s too shocked and hurt to react, and I understand why. It’s a betrayal he never expected in a million years. He’s staring at me now like I’m a stranger.

“It’s straightforward enough, *brat*,” I continue, hating myself. “I went to Igor and said I’d happily take over leadership of our *bratva* if he’d help me get rid of you, and he agreed. He’s always wanted to play at being a real mobster, and now he’s got the chance, alongside me.” I take a step closer, leaning on the desk. “The man I killed the other night was Lawrence Webster. You know, the hero ex-cop? Well, the plan is to frame you for that murder.”

“Sasha, you can’t be serious,” Vlad says, snapping out of shock. “If the *komissiya* formally burns me, nowhere will be safe for us. Our family will be hunted down, and our empire routed. What the fuck will be left for you to —”

Vlad stops abruptly as the penny drops, and I can almost feel my heart smash into splinters.

“Figured it out?” I ask. “You have one chance to go and stay gone. Take everyone with you. We’ll make something up; you’ll keep your lives and whatever’s in your personal accounts. As Papa said—all that matters is power. I don’t want to be second best anymore.”

“You were never second best.” Vlad clenches his fist but doesn’t move. “Not to me. You were the best brother I could have ever wanted. What the fuck are you *now*?”

Tears well up in my eyes, and I only hope he can’t see in the low light. “You should be grateful, Vlad. I could have let Igor kill you, but that’d be going too far. You know, after everything we’ve been through.” I allow a mirthless grimace to cross my face. “My turn to look out for you! Isn’t that great?”

Vlad’s words are weighted with grief and rage in equal measure. “I’d have fought alongside you in anything, Sasha,” he says. “*For* anything. You’re

throwing all that away just for a false feeling of superiority? Papa would be pleased if at least one son turned out like him. But Mama would be ashamed of you.”

He’s right on both counts. I’ll never forget the look in my brother’s eyes, not if I live for a hundred years, but I have to see this through. If I tell Vlad the truth, he will stand beside me and go to war for my sake. I can’t let that happen.

“Whatever you say.” My voice is robotic. I have nothing left, and if I don’t bring this conversation to an end, I’m gonna break down. “It’d only take one call to Igor for everything to go to hell, and no one would come to your aid.”

“What if I fucking kill you right now?” Vlad says. In his fury, he looks horribly like our father. “I could do it.”

“No, you couldn’t.” I shrug. “That’s precisely why you can’t cut it as pakhan. And if you *did* kill me, Igor would know exactly what happened and unleash his wrath. You’d achieve nothing. The sun has set on your reign, big brother. Leave tonight, and don’t look back.”

Vlad glares at me. His tension peaks, and I’m sure he will hurl himself over the desk and beat me down, but he closes his eyes instead.

“You’re not my brother anymore,” he says. “I sang at your wedding yesterday, Sasha. When you were a kid, Mama called you her little chef. Don’t you remember that?”

No, I don’t. I always thought it was just Dulcie who called me *piccolo cuoco*. I must have blocked it out with pain and drugs.

What else have I pushed too deep to find? Does it hurt so much to remember my mother’s love that I deny myself the memory?

“And what about Josie?” Vlad asks. “What about your wife?”

Good question. Igor said Josie had to stay with me, but what would he do if she left? As long as she stays with Vlad and the others, where he can monitor her, he probably won’t care. I’ll tell him she broke my heart. That’s what he wants—to see me suffer. It will be enough for him, and perhaps he’ll leave her alone as long as she takes my shattered soul with her.

“I don’t care,” I snap. “I just wanted to avoid marrying Claudia, and getting the chance to fuck Josie a few times was worth all the bullshit, but I’m bored now. Her mother was a junkie slut, so I doubt she’s gonna be happy when she finds out about my planned return to the wonderful world of drug dealing.” I wave my hand dismissively. “Morgana can probably use her friend around more than I can use some sulky, resentful whore-wife. Take her with you.”

God, help me. Please get Josie safely away from me. Make her hate me if you have to, but don’t let my love get her killed.



Ten minutes earlier...

Josie

It's still dark. Sasha's side of the bed is cold; wherever he is, he's been gone a while. Distant voices rumble within the belly of the house, and I assume my husband is talking to Vlad, dealing with business. These bratva men never seem to be able to sleep easily.

Nausea swarms through me, and I briskly go to the bathroom, dropping to my knees in front of the toilet. It's the second time it's happened this week.

A notion occurs to me, and I can't shake it once it's in my head. I'm on the pill, but I still bleed. My expected period start date has come and gone, but I put it down to stress and never gave it another thought. Marc always used condoms and pulled out; he never trusted me to take my tablets and would accuse me of trying to trap him with a baby. The prenup even said he would not support me if I got pregnant within the first year of our marriage.

Sasha never hesitates to come inside me. I get the feeling he'd be delighted if I were having his baby; he'd have a hold over me more potent than any marriage license.

My wash bag contains a single test strip. It's been there for months, nestled amongst my skincare stuff, ever since I had a scare when Marc and I were first dating. I take it out and place it on the edge of the basin, staring like it's an unexploded bomb.

Do I want a baby? The thought is terrifying and exciting all at once. As I imagine it, my heart yearns for a little cherub with our combined features toddling around in the house. We could be like Vlad and Morgana. Dedicated to one another and making our own family to ease the pain of what we've lost. But something is not okay between Sasha and me, and familiar insecurities eat away at me, contributing to the sickness in my stomach.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath before snatching up the strip. One quick pee later, I sit on the floor, jiggling my foot and waiting for what feels

like an eternity for the result to appear.

I'm just paranoid. It'll be something I ate. It's too soon, anyway. Better to be sure...

The bathroom floor feels cool against my palm as I sit there, the small plastic stick beside me, and I refuse to look at it for a full two minutes. Finally, I draw a deep breath and pick it up again.

Inevitably, two lines show up as clear as day. There's no doubt about it.

I'm pregnant with Sasha's baby.

I barely have a chance to react before I'm suddenly and violently sick. My throat burns as I gargle water and use mouthwash.

A kaleidoscope of emotions rushes through me - fear, confusion, and a faint glimmer of hope. Sasha may be troubled, but it doesn't mean it's about me. He loves me, and he's worked so hard to convince me of it. Is this fate's way of proving it? Our baby. Made by love, for us to cherish and raise in a happy, complete family. Not one torn asunder by abuse, pain, and death.

Sasha and I are married, for real. Tosca is no longer a threat. It's our time now, and I'm not wasting another moment; my husband's reaction will tell me everything I need to know about his feelings for me.

I leave the test strip by the basin, pull on some clothes, and go looking for Sasha.



I follow the sound of voices until I reach Vlad's study, but as I draw near, fear chills my skin. I've never heard either man sound like this before, and certainly never when they're speaking to each other. The atmosphere is heavy, like a thunderstorm, and I'm not even in the same room.

"And what about Josie?" Vlad's tone is flat, pained. "What about your wife?"

Sasha doesn't sound like himself. It's him, but his voice is twisted into something cruel and mocking. My blood chills as his words wash over me.

“I don’t care. I just wanted to avoid marrying Claudia, and getting the chance to fuck Josie a few times was worth all the bullshit, but I’m bored now. Her mother was a junkie slut, so I doubt she’s gonna be happy when she finds out about my planned return to the wonderful world of drug dealing.”

Return to drug dealing?

My head swims, and I bump into the wall, sliding onto the hallway carpet. Sasha is still speaking, and although he sounds like he’s miles away, I can make out the insults.

He’s calling me a whore. And he said my mom was a—

I can’t stop it; a shriek of anguish escapes me, a cry that’s been building up for years.

I don’t know what’s happening and why, but my husband has been lying to me.

Maybe he just wanted to make me love him because he likes to break women’s hearts like he did to Claudia. Perhaps it was because he desired me and didn’t like being the one who fell hardest. But none of it matters.

He knew what I’d been through. It just didn’t *mean* anything to him.

I’m gripped by a new and disgusting feeling: the realization that someone can understand you profoundly but not actually give a shit. Sasha was using me, just as I always feared he would. I’ve never been less happy to be right about something.

I scramble to my feet and slap the door open, smashing it into the bookshelf. Both men look at me in shock.

“Why, Sasha?” I want to yell, but my voice is weaker than I intend, and I curse my fragile heart that I’m more sad than angry. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Sasha looks at Vlad and then back at me. The silence is suffocating, but when he speaks to me, the words are far worse.

“You heard, I presume?” He rocks on his heels. “I’m taking over this family. Igor and I have it worked out, and I don’t need you now.”

“Wait.” Vlad frowns. “Is Sal Tosca in on this, too?”

“No,” Sasha says, laughing. “Feel free to bring him up to speed, but it’ll be in one ear and out the other on account of the fact that the stupid fuck is dead. Igor killed him, and I say good riddance.” He looks back at me, his gaze cold. “Go wake Morgana and Lili. The G5 is at JFK; be on it. I’ll forward your divorce papers in due course, and then you’re no longer my concern. And I already put a billion dollars in your account, so don’t tell me I never paid for your services.”

Bile stings my throat, and I swallow it as I turn away.



The burnt orange of the sunrise crests the cloud bank, bathing the floor-to-ceiling windows in warm light as we wait to board, but the beauty of the dawn does not break through the pain.

The airport is busy, even at this early hour. People bustle through the terminal, desperate to get home for the holidays. So many smiling faces. Their happiness seems to mock me, and I turn my face away, not wanting anyone to see the crippling sorrow on my face.

My husband was and is everything I despise. It was a man just like him who victimized my mother and led her back to drugs. Hell—my own father was cut from the same cloth. How grimly predictable that I, like Mom, am pregnant with a scumbag’s child.

Vlad talked a lot on the drive over. He told me about Sasha’s past, too: the drug pushing, the flesh dens, the low-down filth he associated with. It hurts to know the truth, but Sasha’s words of love still echo through my memory, refusing to be silenced. My head knows it was all a sick, fucked-up lie, and he’s been laughing at me all along, but my heart pines and aches regardless.

What a naive fool I am.

When we arrived, Vlad gave orders for the plane to be prepped for flight, sending the confused and frightened Dulcie to supervise the crew. We sat to wait at the charter gate, and since then, no one has had much to say.

Lilyana is silent, but her eyes have streamed with tears constantly for almost an hour now, and Avel sits beside her, his arm around her slim shoulders. Morgana stays close to Vlad, her face a mask of concern, but he will take no comfort. He stands at the glass, unmoving, as he watches the airplanes taxiing to the runway one by one.

Sasha betrayed us all. But I carry a constant reminder of him, growing deep in my belly.

I could have a termination, but I don't entertain the idea for more than a nanosecond before dismissing it out of hand. My mom could have gotten rid of me when she realized my father was a manipulative, lying asshole, but she didn't. She chose to take the risk and do all she could to get away. Mom wasn't perfect, but she never gave up on me, and I will follow her example. I have no doubt it'll be tough, money or no money, but my baby and I deserve better.

I catch myself scanning the departure lounge for the hundredth time. Of course, I'm looking for him. Like before, I'm waiting for an airplane to spirit me away, but I'm hoping he'll run to me and take me in his arms. But everything is in ruins now, and I wish I'd never set eyes on the beautiful, heartless mess that is Sasha Kislev.

Morgana leaves Vlad to brood and joins me, sitting beside me on the bench. "We're going to Tuscany," she says. "My parents are out there, looking after Vlad's villa. He'll do something to make this right. He always does."

"But it *won't* be right." I drop my head onto her shoulder, and she leans on me. "The only way we get out of this is by taking down Sasha and Igor, and while that would be a good thing, it'd leave me exactly where I am now. Alone and heartbroken."

"True," Morgana says. "But at least you'd be safe."

I want to tell her about my baby, but I can't. She'll lose her shit and make what I'm contemplating even harder to achieve. It's easier for us both if I keep shtum.

Vlad is walking toward us. "Our plane is just about fueled up," he says. "Come on. Grab your bags, and we'll get going. I don't want to stay here a

minute longer. It's not safe."

Safe. It's a small, soft word but a profound concept that I can barely get my head around. I was stupid enough to sacrifice safety for the thrill of falling, forgetting that all of us have to land sometime. Sasha isn't going to catch me, and now it's clear he was never really there in the first place.

I don't need Sasha to have love in my life. I couldn't successfully guard my heart, but I can protect my child, and from this moment onward, that's my priority.

I check my phone one last time. *Nothing.* With a heavy heart, I switch it off and toss it to the bottom of my backpack.

I've made up my mind.



Sasha

It's only been an hour and a half since the world as I knew it drove away in a black limousine. Already, it feels like eons have passed. When I look out the window, I half-expect to see a totally different view, as though the enormity of what's happened should have permanently altered the whole planet. But of course, it's only me that will never be the same again.

Vlad got the family out quickly, and Dulcie left, too; I heard her beseeching Vlad for an explanation, but he ignored her questions and hustled her out with everyone else. I remained in the study, unable to face the sight of them leaving. I couldn't trust myself not to buckle under the weight of the pain and grab Josie, desperate to tell her the truth. I'd give anything to see the warmth in her eyes again, that secret smile that only I could draw from her.

The last time I saw her, she looked broken. Mortally wounded in a way I never knew was possible. I love her, but I didn't believe she cared as much as I did. Why would she?

I didn't want it to happen that way. It would have been better if I could have got Josie safely away from me without hurting her, but I couldn't see how to do it. It had to be a scorched Earth approach; anything less, and she would have smelled a rat. Vlad will undoubtedly have told her the details by now.

Josie knows who I really am. What I've done. I hurt so many people and was instrumental in activities that destroyed lives. Lives like hers and her mom's. What the fuck was my plan anyway? Did I believe I could keep that part of my life a secret forever?

I let Josie believe she was the one with a shameful past when she was a saint compared to me. She had no choice—she was a *child*, for fuck's sake.

At least now, she will be okay. It will soon be common knowledge amongst the bratva that Sasha Kislev dumped his new wife like a sack of shit, and therefore, her stock as leverage will go right down. That, of course, is the whole point; she hates me, I have given the impression that I don't give a fuck about her, and consequently, no one is likely to bother tracking her down. She's worthless to my enemies if she's worthless to me. Igor will spy

on her for a while, but when things calm down, I'll send her the paperwork and dissolve our marriage. After that, he won't care what she does.

I throw back another vodka. I'd do anything to feel drunk, but it never happens, no matter how much I drink. The *other* thing I want would bring sweet, fucked-up oblivion in moments, but I won't go there.

Our suite is as Josie left it. She threw a handful of things into a bag, but most of her stuff was still in the closet. Her pillow still bears the imprint of her head, and I hurl myself face-down onto it, breathing her in. My roar of impotent rage is muffled, and I roll onto my back, sinking my teeth into the flesh of my arm as I try to hold the tears back.

If I lose it now, I'll tear myself to pieces with grief and fury. It's no worse than I deserve.

I stumble to the bathroom and run the faucet, splashing my face with cold water. It runs off my chin onto the counter, and I run both palms through my hair as I look at my reflection.

Vlad asked it first, and I'm wondering, too. *Who the fuck are you now?*

I see something slightly blurry in the mirror and look at the corresponding spot on the counter. My legs almost buckle beneath me before my brain has fully comprehended what it is.

A pregnancy test. A *positive* pregnancy test.

The next couple of minutes are a blur. I snatch up my phone and try Josie's cell number, but it goes straight to voicemail. One by one, I hear the tinny recorded voices of my family members as they refuse to pick up my call.

"Fuck!" I yell, hurling my phone at the tile wall. I have a stronger arm than Josie; this time, it smashes to smithereens. Cursing aloud, I grab my keys and run down the stairs, taking them two at a time.

Josie is carrying my child. She came downstairs to tell me; that's why she appeared in Vlad's study when she did. If I'd have known sooner, it would have changed everything.

My enemies and rivals may not be interested in hurting my wife, but my heir is entirely different. Blood is blood in the bratva, and unclaimed children are a tremendous liability. Anyone who gets their greasy hands on a Kislev kid will have a hold over me, but it's worse than that.

I don't know if Josie intends to keep the baby, but if she does, Igor will get wind of it, and then she will be in grave danger. He thinks I killed his son, so if he murdered my pregnant wife, it would be an eye for an eye and ensure that I was truly cowed forever.

I can't ask her to stay with me; that would lead to the same outcome as soon as her belly began to swell. But she can't stay with my family either. As much as it hurts, I gotta tell her to run as far as she can from me and mine before my world bleeds her dry.

Words stream out of my mouth that I haven't thought about in years; I don't speak Italian often, but my Mama's prayer rolls effortlessly off my tongue.

"Dio, tieni il mio amore tra le tue mani e perdonami."

God, hold my love in your hands and forgive me.



I run like the Devil himself is at my heels. The polished floor is slippery, and I struggle to keep footing as I sprint for the private charter lounge.

Please be there, Josie. *Please.*

A few strangers are in the lounge, eating caviar and toast points. They all look at me at once as I crash through the door, but it only takes a second for me to establish that my family is not here. I glance up at the window and see the Kislev Enterprises logo sail past, emblazoned on the tail of our jet. The G5 is taxiing for takeoff, already picking up speed as it heads for the strip.

I'm too late.

The sky is brightening, the pinkish hue of the early morning giving way to a new day. The first day without her.

I suddenly feel ridiculous. What would I have said anyway? *Be careful, zolotse. Some bastard might murder you because you're having a Kislev baby. But anyway—happy trails!*

Josie is not safe with Vlad and the family. At least at first, Igor will be spying on them in their exile to ensure they toe the line. And when Josie's pregnancy starts to show... it's more than I can bear to contemplate. She needs to run far, far away. To disappear and never return.

Of course, I didn't need to come here to tell her this. She hasn't vanished off the face of the Earth. Someone will pick up the phone eventually, and I'll get a message to her at the very least. So why did I insist on making this desperate, romance-movie-style bid to catch up with her before she flew out of my life?

Now, in my grief, the answer is obvious. I wanted to see her face again, one more time. I wanted to look into her beautiful eyes and tell her I never meant for this to happen and that losing her felt worse than death.

I've done some truly terrible things in my lifetime. In my heart, I believed my penance would come in the hereafter, but it's here, in JFK airport on a frosty morning, that I'm learning what punishment truly means. I would take Hell and all its torments in exchange for just one chance to make it right again.

I want my wife and child by my side. But I don't *deserve* them.

The glass is cold against my forehead as I lean on the window. The people in the lounge are staring at me, but I don't care. I'll stand here for as long as I can before I have to return to the reality where my own stupidity tore apart everything I loved.

The pregnancy test is in my pocket, and I take it out, turning it over in my hand. The symbol of everything that could have been.

It was *almost* love.

A sharp inhalation behind me makes me turn around. Josie is standing in the doorway, a backpack over her shoulder. As I stare, the color rapidly drains from her face. Neither of us moves, and I wonder if she, like me, thinks she's hallucinating.

Then she blinks, spins on the toe of her sneaker, and she's off, running out of the lounge and away.



Josie

If I lose Sasha, I can go to the gate and board my flight. He won't know where I am or how to find me.

But I have to get away from him *now*.

I saw what he was holding. He's come to claim me and the baby. I will claw his eyes out of his head before I let that happen; that's why I didn't leave for Italy with the Kislevs. Morgana cried, but Vlad pulled her away, telling her I'd made my choice and she needed to respect that.

I gave my best friend a hug and lied. Told her I'd let her know where I was, that I was alright. But I had no intention of doing that because to do so would be to endanger us both. She carries one Kislev heir, and I carry the other—as long as she and Vlad stay away from New York and don't challenge Sasha and Igor, their child will likely be safe. But mine? *No way*.

I only wanted to sneak into the lounge and use their private bathroom. The terminal was so crowded, and I thought I saw Sasha everywhere.

Then he *was* there. Larger than life, right before my eyes, the pregnancy test strip in his hand. I don't know how I could have been so stupid to leave it behind, but when I remembered I had, I knew it was only a matter of time before my husband found it.

Sasha is gaining on me. Although I try to find another gear, I know I can't outrun him. My broken heart is weighing me down.

I skid to a halt, and before I can stop myself, I meet him with a ringing slap to the face. Sasha reels and almost loses his footing, but he catches my arm and stays on his feet.

"Fucking *stop*, Josie!" he says. He yanks me close, and as I try to twist out of his grasp, he holds me more firmly, wrenching my wrist as he does so.

"Argh, you're hurting me!" He releases me, and I grab my wrist, flexing it. "Why are you such a fucking asshole? Everything you said to me was a lie!"

I could start running again, but the look on Sasha's face stops me. He's a mess, his skin pallid, his hair unruly. But it's his eyes that hold me in place. They're wide, bloodshot, with a haunted, desperate look I hoped I'd never see.

"*Moya zhená,*" he says. He sinks to his knees, burying his face in his hands. Around us, people bustle by, ignoring us. "If I'd known you hadn't left with the family, I'd never have come after you. You're not safe with them *or* me."

I could never have imagined him breaking down like this. What am I missing here?

I join him on the floor and fix him with a stare. "Sasha. Tell me what the fuck is going on. You sent me away, and now you're chasing me through JFK as though your life depends on it. What gives?"

"You're carrying my child." He looks at me, his expression softening. "*Our* child. There are people out there who will want to hurt you if they ever find that out. So I came here to tell you to *run*. Run as far as you can from me and my entire family and forget you knew us. Change your name, your identity, everything. Then you'll be safe, just like you always wanted."

I swallow down the rising panic. I'd already figured all that out; that's why I was leaving alone. But I thought it was Sasha who'd be after me. Who is he so afraid of?

"Something is going on here that you're trying to hide," I say. Sasha reaches for my hand, but I swat it away. "You owe me better than this. I have a ticket for another flight, and it's boarding in ten minutes. I'll just go; isn't that what you want anyway?"

"Yes. Of course."

Sasha gets to his feet and helps me to mine. I pull my hand away quickly but see the lie in his eyes. He doesn't want me to go, but he doesn't want me to stay either.

"You don't think I deserve to know the truth?" I ask. "You destroyed the life I was building and made me part of yours without giving me any choice at all. You pretended to love me, all because I dared to leave the city and get engaged to some other guy before you got what you wanted. You let me open

up to you about my past while withholding the crucial information that you were a drug-pushing son of a bitch.”

I can't hold back the sneer on my face, but I feel a tear on my cheek. “Now, after all the pain you've caused me, you want me to just turn away and leave with no explanation? There's no getting away from it, Sasha. You're a bad person.”

“I know.”

We're eye-to-eye, neither wanting to be the first to look away. Then something breaks in him, and he speaks.

“I can't bear to let you go without telling you the truth,” he says, his voice cracking. “But you have to promise me you'll leave and stay gone. I'll have the marriage annulled, and that will be that. Agreed?”

“The way I feel now?” I fold my arms. “Fine.”



My coffee goes cold as Sasha tells me it all. Larry Webster's death, Tosca's murder, and Igor's betrayal. I grow more and more still as the weight of the danger settles on me like a heavy blanket.

“Igor defended me when Oleg was nasty,” I say. “He was kind to you, too. How can a man be so duplicitous?” I slap my forehead with my palm. “Oh, wait. He's a *lawyer*.”

“Yeah.” Sasha slumps back in his chair. “So now you know. Igor killed Tosca and will stop at nothing to kill you, too, once he knows you're pregnant. So you have to get away.”

“You can't let this happen.” I kick him in the shin, and he glares at me. “Tell Vlad, and he'll—”

“Die,” Sacha interrupts, finishing my sentence. “We *all* will. You don't understand. Igor is all in with this vendetta of his. He can't back down now; if the rest of the *komissiya* knew what he'd done, he wouldn't only be disgraced. He'd disappear off the face of the Earth. Vlad can't move fast

enough, and what would he do anyway? Only Tosca knew what was going on, and he's dead. Igor was smart enough not to spring his trap until he knew everything was in place."

My flight will depart in just a couple of minutes. Sure enough, a voice on the Tannoy says my name. *Last call for Josephine Bartlett*. The name on my passport is the old me before my world changed forever.

"Okay," I say. "What about *me*? What was true and what was bullshit, Sasha? Because I'm gonna have to decide what to tell our child, and unlike you, I'm not a natural liar."

He draws a deep breath. "*Zolotse*, I had to do it. Igor told me to keep you with me, but there was no way I could do that. So I said whatever was necessary to make you hate me enough to leave."

I frown. "So you weaponized my insecurities—things you only knew about because I thought I could trust you? Great. And what about the other stuff? Vlad told me you were your father's little lieutenant, running all the vice and sick shit the Kislevs used to be into."

He nods. "That's all true. It's not the person I am now, and I thought I could get away with keeping my past a secret. I didn't want you to look at me like you're doing now."

"Why should I believe you?" I stand and pick up my backpack. "You want to be better than where you came from? I get that. But I never hid anything from you."

I want to turn my back on him forever. To get on the plane and start again, with continents between me and the man who stomped on my heart. But I'm partly to blame. I knew what he was capable of and ignored the red flags because, deep down, I'm a dreamer. I wanted to believe Sasha was a better man than his actions suggested, but like my mother before me, I was wrong.

I promised Sasha I'd go, and he's not trying to stop me now. He lifts his head to look at me, and his face is a mask of pain.

"Goodbye, my Josie," he says quietly. "I love you. Whether or not you believe it makes no difference to how I feel. I'll live out my punishment and take some comfort from knowing I can't hurt you anymore."

My feet are frozen, as though my shoes are glued to the floor. I can't tear my eyes away from Sasha; suddenly, I understand.

I swore to stand by his side. He promised to love and protect me. Sure, the first wedding was a sham, but I said my vows with a different perspective the second time.

Sasha isn't willing to fight because he has nothing to fight for without me. His family will be safe in their exile. And he believes he deserves this. He thinks he's wrought enough pain in his lifetime to have earned this appalling payback. Now he's suffering, bowing under the weight of the terrible sacrifice he's had to make.

I'm angry. Very angry. But I love him. And I can't walk away from him now. Not when I know the real Sasha—strong, decisive, terrifying, intelligent. He'll find a way through this if he has the incentive. And the baby and I are more than enough motivation.

"I'm not going," I say.

Sasha's brow furrows, and he does his best to give me a cold glare, but I see his eyes light with hope. "You promised you'd go," he murmurs. "Why would you stay, knowing what you know?"

"Because I love you, Sasha."

It's true, and he needs to hear it now more than ever. He has to find his mettle and push back against this disaster. Lives now depend on Sasha doing what he does best—exerting his dominance and coming out on top.

He stands and comes to me, wrapping me in his arms. The familiar scent of his skin overwhelms me, and the tears begin in earnest. I bury my face in his shirt, and he cradles my head to his chest.

"I'm so sorry," he whispers. "What the fuck am I gonna do?"

"You're gonna find a way out of this mess," I say. "No, let me rephrase—we are."



Sasha

I'm numb with shock, and I cling to Josie's hand as we head for the parking lot. It's as though she might vanish into thin air if I let her go. She allows me to hold onto her, but I feel her fury in the air between us like a gathering storm.

"So what now?" she asks as I open the passenger door for her.

"I need time to think." I get into the driver's seat and start the engine. "As far as Igor is concerned, you and I are under his thumb and awaiting his instructions. I don't know if anyone is spying on us, but when we get home, I will have to call him and let him know I've done what he said."

"I can't believe it's come to this." She gives a hollow laugh. "It's kind of ironic. You told me it was up to me whether I stayed with you, only to send me away, run after me, try to send me away again...talk about blowing hot and cold!"

The bite in her tone is undeniable, and of course, she's right. But her bitter anger is nothing compared to the heat of her presence. She burns even brighter now, fueled by indignation and raw courage. What kind of woman comes back to stand at her man's side in the face of life-threatening danger?

My wife.

I'm lost in admiration for Josie's sheer moxie. I have to justify the risk she's taken by staying with me. Is there anything I can do? Anyone I can leverage?

My thoughts refuse to go where I want them to. Instead, my mind is awash with slivers of memory, catching the light like splinters of broken mirror.

Piccolo cuoco. Vlad remembers Mama calling me that nickname, and now, so do I.

I can see myself in the kitchen of our home. I must be young, as I can't see over the countertop, and Mama has to stand me on a stool. She got me a

chef's toque, the pleated hat I'd seen cooks wearing when we visited restaurants, and I'm wearing it with pride. She's showing me how to roll fresh pasta dough on a ribbed board to make pieces of fusilli.

I blink hard, trying to clear my head. I don't wanna remember her, not now. Not when I've ruined everything.

Mama is laughing, ruffling my hair to get the flour out. "Ah, my Sasha!" she says. "You get your hair from the Italian side of the family. Never cut it short!" She takes my cheeks in her hands and kisses me. "Ti amo, caro figlio. I love you."

My eyes are stinging badly. I want to punch somebody, smash something to shit, or scream until I throw up. Maybe all three.

Vlad had more of our mother's attention, but that was because she was at war with our father for Vlad's soul. He wanted his oldest son to be a brutish sociopath like him; she knew her boy was better than that, and she fought for him. It doesn't mean she didn't love me.

I miss her. I miss her every day, and in the many years since her death, I kept my heart buried beside her, not willing to be hurt again. It seems insane to just lie down and play dead in the face of treachery. Mama would expect me to do what I can for my family, and that's what I've done so far. I got them to safety, far from here. Now, I need to work out how to bring them back.

I can't let people believe I'm like my father. No fucking way. He hurt me my whole life, and he murdered my best friend—

"Oh *fuck!*" I cry. I slam on the brakes and sling a right.

"What?" Josie stares at me as my body floods with panic. "What's the matter?"

"I forgot about Signora G. We gotta go to her."

“Do you think Igor will do something to her?” Josie asks.

“I don’t know.” I floor the gas. “But there’s no way I’m leaving it to chance.”

* * *

Signora G looks tired. As usual, she’s in her chair, her blanket on her knees, but her skin is papery and dry. It takes her too long to react to our presence, but when she does, I’m relieved to see her smile.

“Sasha.” She reaches for my hand and puts it to her cheek. “I’m so glad it’s you.”

“*Mio Dio.*” I squat and look into her face as I speak. Her eyes are dull, like old marbles. “You look unwell. When did you last have a drink?”

She coughs. “I don’t know.”

I stand, ready to get her some water, but Josie is already pouring it out. She brings a glassful to us, and Signora G smiles at her as she takes it.

“Hello.” Signora G gazes unsteadily at Josie. “You’re a lovely girl. What’s your name?”

Josie instinctively drops to her knees so she isn’t talking down, and I feel a surge of adoration. My wife is a far better person than me, and I love her for that.

“I’m Josie,” she says gently. “Is it okay that I’m here? I came along to see if you’re feeling alright.”

“I’m fine,” Signora G scoffs. “Just fine.” She glances at me and smirks mischievously before beckoning Josie with her finger. “Come here,” she whispers. “I’ll tell you a secret.” Josie leans closer, and Signora G points at me as she speaks. “He’s in love with you. I can tell by the way he looks at you.”

Josie’s eyes meet mine, and there’s an awkward pause. Signora G hoots with laughter. “And you are crazy about *him!* Aren’t you?”

Josie looks like she wants to deny it, but she doesn’t. “We’re married,” she says, “so it is what it is.”

Signora G takes a sip of water and hands Josie the glass. “Young things like you play silly games, but it’s as plain as day. You’re in love with him. And whatever he’s done won’t change that, so why hold on to your anger?” She folds her hands in her lap. “Life’s too short. I should know. It’ll be babies next, *Dio sia lodato!*”

I can’t stop myself. “My wife is pregnant. How did you know?”

“It’s natural, of course.” Signora G looks well pleased with herself. “From love comes children. It’s a blessed thing.” Her expression darkens. “Not so much for your beautiful mama, but she got love from *you*, so that’s a blessing too.” She lifts a thin hand, placing it on Josie’s cheek. “*Angelo prezioso,*” she says to her, her voice soft. “Keep God beside you, *cara*, and be safe.”

Josie catches my eye and gives me the smallest of smiles, but it’s the one I know. The one that’s only for me. “Thank you,” she says. “These are hard times. We’ll do our best.”

“So no one has been to see you?” I ask Signora G. “Things are not going very well. Do you remember a man called Igor?”

Her breath catches in her throat, and she stares at me. It’s as though hearing Igor’s name has cut through the fog in her mind, and the clarity hurts her heart.

“Oh, my Rocco.” Her eyes fill with tears, and Josie takes her hand. “Rocco. I miss him so. I don’t know why it happened that way.”

I don’t want to cause her pain. But she loves me, and it was her son who died at my side. She deserves her chance to despise me.

“Igor is the head of the *bratva komissiya,*” I begin. “But he was your lover, wasn’t he? And Rocco’s father.”

Signora G furrows her brow as though searching for something in the recesses of her memory. “Yes. He was. I haven’t seen him since...” She falls silent for a moment. “Has he done something to you?”

I close my eyes. “I’m sorry. It was my fault Rocco died. My father killed him. He wouldn’t have known where to find us that day if it weren’t for me. I told him where we were going.” My voice cracks. “I didn’t know what he

was going to do. I swear it.”

I can’t look at Josie, but I know she’s staring at me. Back at the airport, when I told her the tale, I left this part out—all she knew was that my father had murdered Rocco, but not the logistics of how it went down.

“What are you doing?” Signora G sounds irritated, and I’m glad of it. Her tone reminds me of her younger days when she would try to get Rocco and me to come inside for dinner. “Don’t get that way. You didn’t kill Rocco.” I look up to see an expression of peace on her face. “He’s gone, Sasha. Igor left me and never spoke to me again, although he sent me money sometimes. I still think I see him now and then. Silly, really.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about him,” I say. Signora G nods, then frowns and whispers to Josie.

“Who is he talking about?” she asks.

Josie pats her hand. “It’s okay. But you need some help here. We’re gonna get some carers to come and see you tomorrow. Make sure you eat and are comfortable.”

Signora G nods. The mist has obscured her memory again, and she’s lost the thread of the conversation.

“Okay,” she says. “Will you settle me in my bed? I know it’s almost morning, but I’ve been in this chair a long time, and my back is sore.”

We help her to her feet. She leans on me, and I’m struck by a sudden recollection of my mother shortly after the twins were born. When she had sepsis, no one knew. Helping her to the bathroom to be sick for the tenth time that day, not knowing she’d be dead by the following morning.

“My book is on the table there,” she says. Josie picks it up. It’s *Les Misérables*, a heavy hardback several inches thick.

“I relate to Fantine.” Signora G slips her arm into Josie’s as we meander slowly to the bedroom. “Do you like to read, *bella*? What is your favorite?”

“I like *The Little Mermaid*,” Josie replies warmly. “I kinda relate to her, too.”

“You mean you fell head-over-heels for a handsome prince and turned your life upside down your life to be with him?” Signora G laughs. “Ah, yes. I was young once, too, you know. But this man of yours will not let you down. He’ll be as smitten with that baby as he is with you, and that’s saying something.”

As we leave, I realize she didn’t call me Rocco once.



Sasha

I never realized how heavy a burden the guilt was. The old lady might be unable to remember everything, but her feelings are as clear as ever, and she bears no ill will. The squeezing grasp of my self-hatred has eased, and I can truly breathe for the first time in years.

It always hurt me to think of my mother, but now, memories of her love flow freely through my mind, holding me up and making me want to fight back.

More than anyone, it's all for Josie. I *have* to figure this out.

"We'll get someone to look after Mrs. G," I say as we walk to the car. "I'll call the best home care agency in the city. I've offered before, but it was only when you suggested it that she seemed willing to let it happen."

Josie looks pensive. "I'm worried for her, Sasha. Why had she been in her chair so long anyway? And she looked frightened, too."

"She often does." We get into the vehicle. "It must be terrifying to have gaps in your mind. But she's a tough old lady. She will be fine, and I'll make sure she wants for nothing when this is all over."

It's only a few minutes' drive to my home, and my heart sinks as we pull up outside. The place is typically full of people. The people I love. Tonight, it's empty, and if it weren't for my wife at my side, I'd feel utterly alone. But Josie is here, and I can deal. We may have to play along with Igor's bullshit for now, but I will find a way through this.

Someone is standing on the steps. It's still dark enough that they are little more than a silhouette, and I'm terrified it's Vlad. As much as I desperately wish he was here, it would be bad news if he was.

I wind down the window and the figure approaches. It's Igor.

"I hear congratulations are in order," he says, without feeling. His breath is visible in the cold air, making him look like a dragon. "Get out of the fucking car. I want a word."

Josie starts to speak, but I hold up a hand, silencing her. I don't know why Igor is here, and I need to keep the situation calm.

"I was about to call you." I open the door. "Vlad and the rest of the family have left. I told them you and I are taking over, so Vlad thinks I'm the cunt of the century and that I betrayed him. You got what you wanted."

As I stand, a force hits me like a battering ram in the small of my back, and I'm hurled forward. Igor steps aside, and I fall, my head smashing into the wall. Igor kicks me in the ribs, and I curl up as pain swarms through my chest.

My head is spinning, and I fight to stay conscious. I have a blurry, side-on view of my car, and a man is wrestling with Josie, taping her wrists and ankles. He moves with frightening speed, throwing her onto the back seat when he's done. It must be him who knocked me down.

I roar with rage and scramble to my feet, but it's easy enough for Igor to kick them out from under me. My neck is wet, and I realize I'm bleeding from my ear. My head injury could be pretty bad, or it could be superficial, but right now, I'm fucked.

Igor lifts a polished boot into the air, resting the sole carefully on my throat.

"Stay there," he says.

I dropped my keys somewhere, and I hear the jangle as the other guy finds them on the asphalt. He removes the house key and tosses it at Igor, who catches it easily. Josie's muffled screams are drowned out by the engine, and just like that, they're gone.

She's gone.

Igor bends down so I can see his face. "I sent some men to see Marina a while back. Didn't she tell you?"

Yes, she did. I always thought it was one of her ramblings.

"I always knew you were visiting Marina regularly. After your father told me the truth about Rocco, I bugged her home and bided my time, waiting for you to drop some information I could use." He grins. "I didn't expect you to make

it as easy as you did. Pissing off Sal Tosca was very helpful of you. But I left the listening devices in place anyway. And, of course, your car now has a tracker, too. I put that in place before I entered Tosca's house yesterday."

This bastard thought of everything, which is more than can be said for me. How could I have been so stupid?

"Get up." Igor removes his boot and digs me in my side again. "We're going inside, and I'll tell you exactly what will happen."



I make it to the downstairs lounge, collapsing onto the couch. The lights are too bright, and my head throbs, but I'm no longer in danger of passing out.

A couple of minutes here should be enough. Then maybe I can beat the ever-loving shit out of this fucker until he tells me what he's done with my wife.

"I knew your word was worth nothing," Igor says. He stands beside the drinks tray and pours himself a whiskey. "So when I saw your car heading for JFK, I thought you were trying to flee at first. I'll admit to being shocked—you knew I'd stop at nothing to hunt down and kill every Kislev if you tried to get away from me. So it was good to see you were only bringing the girl back."

I should have made Josie leave. I shouldn't have gone after her in the first place. She's gonna die, and it'll be because of me.

"She'll be fine," Igor says, as though I'm thinking aloud. "I won't hurt her unless you make me, not when she's carrying your baby. Although it would be fair enough if I did, don't you think?"

"I'll kill you." My words are strained, filtered through my tortured breath. "I swear it. You'll die for this."

"I'm afraid not," Igor says. "If I don't call my associate in ten minutes, he's under instructions to waste that little whore. And he's a nasty guy. He'll probably do a few other things first if you get my meaning."

My whole body goes cold. “Igor. You hurt my wife or child, and I’ll make you suffer the kind of torment The Devil himself couldn’t imagine.”

“My son is dead!” Igor shouts, his voice ringing off the walls. “My only child. I lost my love, too. Why should you get to keep what you stole from me?”

“You tracked my car, saw I was at Signora G’s house, and tuned in to listen, so you must have heard it all.” I try to sit up. “Marina, Signora G. She said it wasn’t my fault.”

Igor won’t look at me. “It *is* your fucking fault,” he says, hatred suffusing every syllable. “I don’t care what you or anyone else says. And I *will* have my vengeance. How else will I find peace?”

“You won’t.” Every word is painful. “Nothing will bring Rocco back. I think of him every day, too.”

Igor isn’t listening. “I will keep your wife with me now. You will be sworn in as the new pakhan of the Kislev bratva tonight at the *komissiya*’s Christmas Gala. You’ll see Josie there, and you’d better play along because I’ll put a fresh bruise on her for every word of back-talk from you. Is that clear?”

I bite my tongue hard enough to taste the metallic tinge of blood. As much as I want to pummel Igor to a bloody pulp, to do so would be to guarantee Josie’s death.

“Your silence is most reassuring.” Igor throws back his whiskey and flings the glass into the corner, where it smashes on the tile. “Until then, I suggest you rest up and attend to business, as befits a new leader. I’ll see you at my estate at eight p.m. You’d better shake my hand when you arrive.”

He slams the door as he leaves.



Josie

I don't remember much about the car journey. The tape over my mouth made it tough for me to breathe, and I drifted in and out of consciousness. I do recall being carried up a flight of stairs and dumped on a bed, and when hands reached for my wrists, I tried to fight. A stick of sharp pain in my upper arm, and I knew nothing more.

There's no way of knowing how much time has passed. It could be minutes, could be days. Maybe Sasha is dead, and I'm going to die in this room. Die because of what I mean to him.

There are so many ways for Igor to hurt me. He doesn't have to kill either of us to make us suffer, and I have no doubt he knows that. The man lost a family and knows how it feels. Igor would have had me watched, and when he saw my swelling belly, he'd have dragged me back here anyway. He took me from Sasha because, somehow, he knows about the baby.

I no longer believe Sasha set out to destroy my life. He loves me, and without that simple and beautiful truth, my baby and I would be safe, many miles away.

All we needed was time. Just a little time to work out how to turn this around and bring Vlad and the others home without murders and betrayal hanging over us all.

Like hell. I could have run away. Why, in the teeth of actual danger, did I turn down my one shot at safety?

Because I don't *want* to be safe if that means no Sasha.

My head aches. As my vision adjusts, I take in the room. It's unfamiliar but clearly an under-used bedroom; there's a musty scent, like old furniture polish. The bed is a four-poster, and my hands are lashed to the top posts with old-fashioned cuff restraints. They're the type that were used in asylums years ago, pulled tight with velcro and secured with a buckle. My arms are stretched wide, and there's nothing I can do to get loose.

Igor may have enough hate in his heart to do worse than kill me. Sasha will be under his control, paralyzed by the terror of what Igor might do to me, but it will make no difference. He'll dangle the bogus possibility of reuniting us, and we'll both fall into line. We have no other option now.



When the door opens, I jump; I must have been dozing again. I don't know what my abductor injected me with, but it's still affecting me, and I turn my head to one side, swallowing as I fight another wave of nausea.

"Hello, Josephine." Igor sits on the edge of the bed. "Good to see you're still alive."

I don't want to cry in front of him, so I squeeze my eyes closed.

Igor's fingers are suddenly on my chin. They're rough, and he grips too tightly. "Look at me, you whore. Now." He laughs as I comply. "Oh, you're angry, aren't you?" He slaps my cheek. "You never had any business being here in the first place. This world has only two roles for women; as sweet, docile wives or cheap sluts. You don't get to be both. And seeing as you're already a slut, you have no place as the bride of a man like Sasha Kislev. I'll never know how you connived your way into that place of privilege."

"He came to *me*." My voice is hoarse. "Sasha made me marry him. None of this situation is of my making."

"Ah, of course." Igor slides a hand over my thigh, and I try not to cringe. "And he killed Marc Bonneville, the rich guy. I can only assume your pussy is worth all this strife, but I don't see how. One whore is much the same as the rest."

I close my eyes again. All I want is to block him out.

"So tonight is the bratva's annual grace-and-favor party, where our employees and associates live it up on the *komissiya's* tab," Igor continues. "You and Sasha are newly married, so you must be there together, or it'll look strange." His smile is predatory. "So this will be the first of many similar scenarios where you dress up, stand beside your husband in public,

play nice, and then return home with me. You'll be my little pet. And if you or your precious Sasha act out, you'll regret it.

If he'd just go away, I could fall asleep again. Perhaps it'll all have been a sick dream when I wake, and I'll be safe and held in my husband's arms.

The thought of him pushes my fear and grief over the edge, and a tear finally escapes. Igor wipes it with his thumb, and I shrink away from his touch.

"Get used to it," he snaps. "You'll feel my hands a lot over the next few weeks. After Sasha is sworn in as pakhan, I'll need to get him well ground down, so you won't see much of him. Once he understands you'll be paying for his mistakes with your body, I'm sure he'll be a good little soldier, but until then, discipline is important. After all," he slaps me harder, making my cheek sting, "spare the rod, spoil the child."

So I'm going to be Sasha's wife in public and Igor's whore in private. How can I live like that?

"You'll never get away with this," I whisper. "Sasha won't stand for it. He'll find a way to fuck you up."

"The faith and hope the two of you have is heartwarming but misguided," Igor says, seeming irritable. "Tosca is dead, and his family are under the *komissiya's* protection while I decide what to do with their organization. No one else knows what's happening here."

His eyes scan my body as he speaks. "You can't run away. I would find you easily. And won't kill yourself. Not when you're carrying Sasha's baby, and not once it's born, either—like Sasha's mother, you'll be trapped in a sham marriage, with only your child to console you." He laughs. "And who knows what life will be like for that little shit? I haven't decided yet, but it's tempting to arrange an accident for Sasha. I could marry you, take over the Kislev bratva for real. So many fun possibilities!" He tilts his head, taking in my disgust. "Or I could stab you in the belly right now for daring to look at me like that."

I stare at the ceiling as Igor's face draws closer to mine. His breath is sour, and I taste bile in my throat. Igor sticks out his tongue and drags it from my chin to my hairline, and I can take no more. My scream of anguished horror

delights him, and he pauses, his face inches from mine.

“How about a kiss?” he croons.

He needs me to make his dirty little scam work, so he can't kill me. I know what I'm about to do is dumb, but I can't help myself; it's worth it.

A quick hock in the back of my throat, and I spit in Igor's eye. He pulls away with a roar, wiping his face with his sleeve before drawing back his arm and smashing my face with a powerful backhand. I cry out as his heavy gold ring catches my brow bone, and the pain makes me see stars.

Igor is breathing heavily. “Filthy little cunt,” he sneers. “Better hope your make-up covers that.”

The last thing I see is his blurry back as he walks away. My skull throbs, and I roll my head on the pillow, trying to stave off unconsciousness.

What the hell am I gonna do?



Sasha

I stay on the couch for a long time, watching the room change as the light seeps in. The pain in my chest is abating, and I suspect my ribs are merely bruised, as I can move without wincing. I'm unsure about my head, but I'm awake and not bleeding anymore, which counts for something.

Igor will let Josie and I play our parts in front of others, but she's no longer mine to keep. If I'd anticipated this possibility, I'd have put her on a plane to anywhere, even if I'd have had to tie her up and throw her in the cargo hold to do it.

Our marriage was bullshit, then became beautifully, terrifyingly real. Now it's fake, a shadow of what we were. What we *could* have been. And Josie is what she always feared she'd be: property. A thing for a man to use.

My wife is strong. She won't break straight away. But she can't withstand that kind of life forever. What will she put herself through to ensure our child's safety? I don't think there's anything she wouldn't be willing to endure, but the possibilities make me feel cold to the marrow of my bones. Igor despises me and knows better than most that nothing hurts like love. If I hadn't fallen for Josie, he wouldn't be able to use her to control me, but it's not myself I'm worried about.

Igor would never believe me, but if he'd only let Josie go, I'd play along like an obedient puppet. Put oceans between her and this sordid world of ours, and I'd let him do what he wanted, forever. But he's placed her at the heart of his sick vendetta, and that I cannot abide. It was already personal for Igor, but now it's personal for me, too. He's taken everything.

If Igor was a seasoned bratva man and not a lawyer, he'd know that a guy with nothing to lose is a severe liability. And that guy is me. All I need to do is think of something because once I have a shot to take, I'm fucking taking it.



The coffee machine seems so loud because the house is quiet. This kitchen is usually a hive of activity during the morning, but with the family gone, it feels like a tomb.

They'll have arrived at the villa by now, unaware of what's happening at home. I can't even try to call Vlad again; my phone is broken. I'll get a new one as soon as possible, but I need caffeine and a clear head, not to mention a clean shirt.

Igor told me to deal with business. The stupid fuck doesn't understand that most things run themselves on a day-to-day basis because we have people who oversee our operations. Does he think a pakhan needs to micro-manage?

I take the coffee to Vlad's study and sit behind the desk. I guess it's *my* study now, but it feels like a crime scene.

It's the only room in the house with a landline telephone, and I make a few calls just to check that things are as they should be. No one asks why it's me and not Vlad calling, but that's hardly surprising—I often deal with our people. When it comes to human resources, I'm no Arman, but—

Holy shit. Arman. He wasn't at the house last night, and Igor never mentioned him.

I flip the pages of Vlad's address book and dial Arman's cell. He answers on the third ring.

"Sasha?"

"Yeah. Wait, how'd you know it was me and not Vlad? I'm calling from the office phone."

"I know what happened last night," he replies. "Vlad called me and said you'd sold us out to go in with Igor. I said it had to be a scam, and Vlad lost his shit with me, so I spent the night elsewhere, trying to work out what the fuck to do."

Arman deliberately doesn't tell me where he is. He's intelligent; if I were in his shoes, I wouldn't say, either. "It's bullshit. I'm in big fucking trouble here, but I can't drag you into it by explaining. Igor has forgotten all about you, and it'll do no good if he remembers you exist. But can you do one thing

for me?”

“Sure,” he replies. “I’m in no position to argue anyway. What do you need?”

I have a thought that won’t quit. A name. A person who hates me and, very recently, made what I took to be idle threats. I’d like to talk a little more about his associations.

“Look into Freddy DeSilva for me. You know, our pet police captain? I need to know who else he likes to play with. He may be able to unfuck all this, but I’ll have to threaten him pretty badly to make it happen.”

Arman’s tone is cool. “Whatever you say, pakhan. I don’t believe this situation is what it seems, so I’ll help you, but if I find out you’re using me, I’ll fucking kill you. I just want the family back home.”

“Me too,” I say. “Just stay the course, *tovarishch*. I would advise approaching Igor and offering to work for him, saying you’re done with us. If he asks me, I’ll corroborate it. Better than him finding you and having you killed.”

“I’ll consider it. Stand by, and I’ll call you back in an hour.”



After a quick call and an urgent courier service, I have a new cell phone. It’s synced and ready to go, with all my contacts at my fingertips again. Against my better judgment, I try Josie’s number.

Hi, her voicemail trills. It’s Josie Kisleva. Here’s the tone: you know what to do!

I don’t. I have no idea what to do. All I have is the vaguest of leads, no more than an inkling. But my thoughts keep returning to what Freddy said.

You have no fucking idea what’s coming to you, Sasha. You’ve made some important enemies. Either the man was freakishly prophetic, or he knew something I didn’t.

I hear Josie’s voicemail beep, and impulsively, I say, “I love you.” Whether she’ll ever hear that message, I don’t know, but those three words encompass

a thousand others.

I'm sorry. I adore you. I never meant to hurt you. You're my world, my downfall, the love of my life. My soul is in torment, knowing you're frightened and alone. I will never forgive myself if—

The phone rings in my hand, startling me. For a moment, my heart leaps, thinking it's Josie, but I can see it's Arman.

"Tell me what you know."

"Freddy De Silva doesn't pass on enough of his dirty money to his precinct buddies," Arman says. "A junior detective spilled easily enough. Freddy ran a few errands for Sal Tosca. Apparently, they know each other from way back. Tosca was godfather to Freddy's niece."

That's it. That's the connection I'm missing. As a fellow cop, Freddie De Silva must have known Lawrence Webster and was able to arrange for him to be at the hotel that day. Freddie expected to get paid well in return for giving Tosca some distance. I wonder if he got that money yet? My intuition tells me no; Tosca was notoriously tardy with his payouts, and the fat fuck was dead before Igor's plan had fully unfolded.

"Okay, *bratan*. Thanks. I'll be in touch."

I look up another number and redial.

"Put me through to Captain De Silva."

A short pause and Freddy is on the line, breathing too loudly. "The fuck do *you* want?"

"I wanted to extend an invitation to our gala tonight." I pause, but Freddie is silent, and I wonder how much he knows already. "I'm gonna be formally announced as the new Kislev pakhan, and I don't want there to be any bad blood. Seems unnecessary, don't you think?"

"Yeah," Freddy replies hesitantly. "Are the Toscas invited?"

The fucker is bluffing. He knows Tosca is dead—I can hear it in his voice—but he doesn't understand what is actually happening.

“Of course,” I say. “I don’t know whether they’ll all turn up, but—”

“Cut the shit,” Freddie snaps. “You know Sal was killed, probably by you. I don’t know what’s happening here, but it’s nothin’ to do with me.”

Freddy sounds like every other scumbag does when they’re running scared. This loser will collapse like a house of cards as soon as I breathe on him, but I need to do that in person.

“I didn’t do anything to Sal, but we can discuss that now, at my home. Consider yourself summoned, but come alone.”

Dead air. For a minute, it looks like Freddy might refuse, but then I hear him exhale. “Fine,” he says. “But you have some explaining to do.”

I hang up with a grin. *On the contrary, my idiot friend. You’ll give me what I need, or you’ll die.*

After a moment’s contemplation, I call Vlad and leave a message.

“Vlad, *brat*. They’re swearing me in at midnight at the gala. If you don’t hear from me after that, I’m sorry. I tried.”



Ten hours later...

Josie

Igor's estate used to belong to an old Hollywood star. She was known for her lavish soirees, hence this ostentatious ballroom.

Beautiful though it is, it has a kind of queasy, over-fed excess to it. On closer inspection, the luster is fading from the gold fittings, and the flock wallpaper is shabby. The Christmas tree in the center of the room is stunning, though; fifteen feet of snow-flocked greenery festooned with baubles and candy canes. A band plays festive classics in jazz style, and couples move one another around the floor.

The dress Igor insisted I wear is horrible. The cutaways on the sides are too revealing, and the split is too high in the thigh. It's an unflattering bright pink, too brash and showgirl-style, and somehow the cheapest-looking thing I've ever seen, despite probably costing a fortune.

He tossed it at me along with some heeled sandals and told me to 'make myself presentable.' Just like Marc and every other piece of shit who reduced me to nothing more than a decoration. In all the years I was a call girl, I never looked sluttier than I do now.

I sit beside Igor, smiling benevolently as people come to talk to him. At least I have the illusion of freedom, if only for tonight.

All I want is Sasha. My heart aches to see him again, even if it's only for a little while. My injured brow bone is masked by Tylenol and concealer, and I can only hope my smokey eye makeup hides the burgeoning bruise in the socket. Sasha can't risk losing his temper.

My eyes dart around the room, looking for him, and Igor laughs at me. "He'll be here, don't worry," he says. "If it weren't for you, he'd have killed himself or fled by now. You're the reason he'll walk through that door."

Sure enough, the revelers part, and there he is. In a maroon suit, silver tie, and mother-of-pearl cufflinks, Sasha looks devastating. I'm ashamed to be wearing this atrocity of a dress in his presence.

"Go to him," Igor hisses. "Put on a good show, you hear me?"

Sasha sees me as I draw nearer and reaches for my hand. He pulls me close and sways me with the music, his lips beside my ear.

“*Zolotse*.” He puts his palm on the small of my back, stroking it gently. “I see your face. What the fuck did that bastard do to you?”

“He hit me because I spat in his eye,” I reply. I rest my cheek against his chest, feeling the deep rumble of his laughter.

“That’s my girl.” Sasha cradles my head. “I’m sorry. Don’t think I’m not raging; I am. But I’ve also learned that my impulsivity comes at a steep price. I can’t react right now, but believe me when I say Igor *will* die.”

Something is different. I sense a glimmer of hope in him, a pinprick of light in the darkness. I look at him, searching his eyes.

“What’s happened?” I ask. “You thought of a way out of this, didn’t you?”

Sasha glances in Igor’s direction, but the old man is facing away from us, deep in conversation with a politician. “Yes,” he murmurs. “I had a conference with my good friend Freddy De Silva earlier today. Remember him?”

“The guy you almost turned into a kabob? Of course, I remember him.”

Sasha smiles and kisses my forehead. “He was the middle man between Tosca and the police commissioner I killed, Lawrence Webster. It turns out Igor and Webster were old adversaries, so Igor wanted the man dead, but of course, that wasn’t the main motivation. Tosca exaggerated his acquaintance with Webster, saying he could arrange for the guy to be at a specific place so I could carry out the hit.”

“So Tosca lied and needed someone to help him.”

“Correct.” Sasha spins me, and we waltz out of Igor’s eye-line around the tree. “That’s where Freddy came in. Tosca and Freddie were good buddies and trusted one another. Tosca offered Freddy a cut of the spoils if he agreed to coax Webster to the hotel and reveal the location to me. The only stipulation was that Igor couldn’t know about Freddy’s involvement, as he’d be pissed at Tosca for involving a third party in their treachery.”

It all falls into place in my mind. “Freddy is a witness to all this, but Igor doesn’t know.”

“You got it, *moya zhen*a. Freddy was dumb enough to think he could blackmail me until I reminded him that his position was far more precarious than mine. Igor had no problem murdering Tosca in cold blood to keep this plot under wraps—if he finds out about Freddy’s part in this, he’ll kill him too, without hesitation.” He grins. “So obviously, I threatened to enlighten Igor unless Freddy came through for *me*. He’ll be well paid if he plays his part, and his dear sister and niece won’t be trafficked.”

“Sasha!” I gasp. “You said that?”

“Yeah. I know that’s pretty low, but it’s only a threat. I needed Freddy on the ropes. The little bastard almost pissed himself with terror.”

“So what’s next?”

Sasha doesn’t get a chance to reply. Igor is behind him, a few of his cronies in tow.

“Hello, my boy!” Igor places a hand on Sasha’s shoulder, forcing us to break our embrace. “I was just saying, sad business with your brother. Unfortunate business indeed.”

Oleg is behind him, and he speaks. “Sasha. You told Igor your brother left without explanation, leaving you in charge. Why?”

“I’m not sure,” Sasha replies, “but it was strange. He took the family with him, saying he didn’t want to be involved anymore.”

“I think it was cowardice.” Another *komissiya* member is weighing in, shaking his head. “Sal Tosca dead, and Commissioner Webster too? I’m not saying there’s a connection, but it’s a coincidence that Vladimir Kislev abdicated his leadership without explanation just hours after the killings. Perhaps he knew the truth would come out, and he’d be in the shit.”

Sasha clenches his fist. It’s hard for him to listen to this, but he has to keep his cool. Igor will allow the bratva gossip mill to churn, selling the narrative that Vlad had something to do with the deaths, and Sasha will have no choice but to nod and smile.

If we get through this alive, all these people are gonna see what my husband's wrath really looks like.

"So, tonight's your night." Igor claps Sasha on the back, and he stifles the desire to punch him. "I'll be swearing you in as pakhan of your bratva at midnight, just like your Papa before you. I remember it well. Bet you wish he was here to see your big moment!"

If looks could kill, Igor would be cold on the ground, but Sasha's voice is level when he speaks. "Let's not dwell on that." He lowers his brow almost imperceptibly, but I notice. "Remember—we all answer to our maker when our turn comes around."

Before the atmosphere can get frosty, a gaggle of bratva wives descends on the *komissiya* men, giggling and demanding dances. They pair off dutifully, laughing as they go, leaving Igor behind.

"You two had better be well-behaved tonight," he says, drawing closer. He points at me but addresses Sasha. "*She* already knows what she'll get if you don't keep yourself in check."

Sasha says nothing, but his eyes are glacial. I shudder, and he wraps a protective arm around me as Igor gives us his back.

My husband is not a noble, selfless hero. He's a villain to the core, and his enemies will soon discover that you can't keep a bad guy down for long.

My stomach rolls, and I belch. Whether it's the tension or the baby, I don't know, but I feel like hell. "Stay here a minute," I say. "I gotta use the restroom."



The restroom is mercifully empty. My stomach cramps painfully, and I lean over a basin, closing my eyes as I try to steady my breathing. The door opens, and I'm aware of someone behind me, but I don't want to move.

"Josie."

I know her voice. She was screeching at me every other time I heard it, but now, there's no mistaking it. I turn to face her.

Claudia Tosca is uncharacteristically modest in a maxi dress with a high neckline. Her eyes are ringed with red, accentuated by her lipstick, and her hair looks like greasy straw. For the first time, I notice her freckles, which seem darker due to her pallor, and I see how young she truly is. Crazy and unstable, yes, but in her vulnerability, she reminds me of Lilyana; how the two girls have turned out so differently is strange.

"If you're here for a fight, I'm not interested," I say. "I'm sick, I'm tired, and everything is fucked up. You can't do anything that would make it worse."

Claudia clutches my wrist. "I know I shouldn't come to you. I don't deserve your help after everything I've done." Her eyes spill over. "But I'm so scared. My father is dead, and Igor is well into the process of taking official guardianship of me. He will be controlling all the Tosca *famiglia's* assets from now on, me included." She sniffs, trying to calm down. "My aunt and uncle have been compensated, but they're leaving the city. They are afraid they might be accused of my father's murder if they try to keep control."

I don't know what to say, so I keep quiet. Claudia's hand shakes, and I extract myself from her grip but don't back away.

"What do you think will happen to you?" I ask.

"Igor already informed me." Her broken expression twists into a sneer of disgust. "He said he would keep me as his ward for a while. Maybe have some fun with me. Then he'll marry me off when he gets bored."

"Jesus," I say. "That's disgusting."

A woman bustles into the restroom, and Claudia and I dart past her and out before she notices something's amiss. Sasha sees us go, and he catches my eye, anxious questions written on his face. I shake my head as Claudia and I leave the ballroom, looking for a quiet place to talk.

We find a small lounge and go inside. I close the door and turn to Claudia.

"What did Igor tell you about your father's death?" I ask.

Claudia's haunted eyes meet mine. "He said he suspects Vlad Kislev."

"Who do *you* suspect?"

Her voice drops to a quivering whisper. "I don't suspect," she says. "I *know*. I saw it all."



Sasha

It's eleven forty-five p.m., and the guests are gone. Only the bratva and the mafia remain, ready to engage in the time-honored rituals of our world.

I am to be sworn in as my family's new pakhan, thereby ushering in a new era of drugs, prostitution, and people trafficking. A business built on pain and suffering, ostensibly with me at the helm, but in reality, it will be Igor pulling every filthy string behind the scenes.

I don't know what Josie and Claudia talked about. Igor came to me, apoplectic that I let my wife go off on her own, and when she reappeared, the evil old fuck was by our sides all damn night. We never had a chance to speak alone, and whenever anyone came up to us, all Igor wanted to discuss was Vlad's deeply suspect decision to run away from his responsibilities.

I've always had Vlad at my back, ready to fight. To face this without him is a nightmare come to life, but I'm ready. I have Josie beside me, and for her, there's nothing I won't do.

I had to do it this way, at this time, because everyone who matters is here tonight. Confronted with the evidence of his treachery, Igor won't be able to wriggle off the hook, not with the rest of the *komissiya* and every underworld boss present to witness.

As long as Freddy comes through.

So much could go wrong. He might chicken out, try to run, destroy the evidence, lie, hide, kill himself—the possibilities are endless. But he's my one shot.

I squeeze Josie's hand once more and take my place at the center of the room beside Igor. I glance at her and see the fear in her eyes. A few minutes between us and a future worse than death. She cradles her stomach absently with her hand, her lip quivering as she battles to keep her composure.

The *komissiya* men arrange chairs beside us, getting settled down, and everyone else gathers around. My cell vibrates in my pocket, and I take it out. A message from Freddie.

Sorry, Sasha. I'm out.

Those four words dash my last hope. It's all fucked. There's nothing I can do now.

I scan the crowd, desperately seeking a reassuring face, but there's no one I can call a friend. Even Arman never showed. I guess he decided to bail on this train wreck before getting caught up in it. I feel Josie's eyes on me, but I can't look at her now.

I failed her. I failed *everyone*.

Igor takes the floor. "*Damy i gospoda, dobryy vecher*. Good evening, ladies and gentlemen." He clears his throat. "We are here to formally welcome Alexandr Sergeyev Kislev to our family as the new pakhan of the Kislev bratva." He clears his throat. "Now. There's been some speculation going around about the murder of Sal Tosca and also the tragic death of my old friend Commissioner Webster. Both of these killings will be investigated, and if there is a connection to Vlad Kislev, we will find out." He waves a finger. "This does not mean we, the *komissiya*, have any concerns about Sasha here. His loyalty is not in doubt."

Igor is a clever bastard. I'll give him that. If there was anyone here who didn't think my brother killed Tosca and Webster, they sure as fuck suspect him now.

"What about *your* loyalty?"

Everyone turns their heads in unison toward the voice. Claudia Tosca steps forward defiantly, standing tall.

"Be quiet, Miss Tosca." Igor's voice has a steely edge. "As I was saying—

"*You* killed my father," Claudia says, raising her voice as shocked murmurs move through the room. "I was there. He told you the place would be empty when Sasha came by, but it wasn't, and you were too arrogant to think of checking. I heard voices, came downstairs, and saw you shoot Papa. I heard you threatening Sasha, too."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. Is Claudia coming to my defense after everything?

Igor waves his hand dismissively. “This woman is a fantasist. Sal Tosca released Sasha from their honor debt, and I ratified it. Nothing to see. I don’t know what happened after that, but *you*,” he points at Claudia, “need help.”

What do I do? If I back her up, it won’t do any good. Claudia has no proof, and as a witness, she is not credible. A hysterical, unstable drug addict, messed up by a broken engagement and her father’s sudden death? Versus the calm, stoic leader of our *komissiya*, a man renowned as a safe pair of hands?

It’s already too late. Claudia is buckling under the pressure, her defiance crumbling away. Oleg goes to her, taking her arm.

“Now, that’s enough,” he says firmly. “You’re making a scene. What have you had?”

“I’m sober,” she says, outrage giving her a boost. “Let go! You people have a traitor and a murderer in your midst, and he’s taking you all for fools!”

A couple of other *komissiya* members join the effort, escorting the ranting Claudia out of the ballroom. Josie meets my eyes, and her sorrow burns me inside.

It’s all over.

“Well, that was entertaining!” Igor says brightly, to a ripple of nervous laughter. “Let’s get this show on the road.” He turns to me. “I will kill her for that,” he whispers.

I believe him. There’s a manic look to him now; perhaps he understands just how much his need for vengeance has warped him. A flicker of something crosses his face—regret, maybe—but he locks it down, replacing it with a benevolent smile.

“Alexandr Sergeyev Kislev, second son of Sergey Kislev, proven soldier of the bratva,” he begins. “It’s my honor to—”

The ballroom door crashes open, and when I look, I’m sure I’ve lost my mind. It’s Vlad, dragging the blood-soaked Freddy by his shirt collar. Behind him is Arman, a gun in his hand.

“Everybody stay fucking calm,” Arman shouts. He trains the gun on Igor, but not before several others in the room draw weapons of their own. “If you shoot me, Igor will die too, so keep those trigger fingers steady and *listen*.”

He holds something out toward me, and I take it. An old-school file full of paper. I flick through, realizing immediately that this is my ticket. Freddy didn’t bullshit me; he really did have the evidence. Message screenshots, call recording transcripts, the works.

I stare at Freddy. “Why did you keep this stuff anyway?”

Vlad releases him, and he falls to the floor, coughing. He’s pretty fucked up; I don’t know who worked him over, but I couldn’t have done a better job myself.

“Leverage,” he croaks. “I’m a cop; I have my ways. I thought Tosca might try to screw me over once he got what he wanted. Didn’t expect it to go down like this.” He gestures at Igor. “You wanna tell him, or shall I?”

Igor knows what’s up. “Shoot him!” he cries, pointing at Vlad. “He killed Sal Tosca and Commissioner Webster. The *komissiya* no longer claims him!”

No one moves. All bravado aside, it would be quite something to gun down Vladimir Kislev on a whim, and no one has the balls to do it, not with so many witnesses.

“The *komissiya* haven’t agreed to that, Igor,” Oleg says, getting to his feet. “And you just said we would be investigating, so how can you drop a death warrant on Vlad Kislev on your own authority?” He nods at me. “You’re at the center of whatever this is, so I want an explanation, and I want it *now*. Are you and Igor working together?”

“No, we are not.” *Fuck, that feels good to say.* “Igor Gusev plotted with Sal Tosca to bring about my family’s downfall. They orchestrated a scenario where I repaid my honor debt to Tosca by killing a specific mark, not knowing that the man was Lawrence Webster, the former police commissioner.”

Oleg frowns. “So you admit to killing a cop?”

“Yes,” I reply, “but it was a set-up. Tosca thought the plan was to destroy my family, and he expected to be handsomely rewarded, but all he earned was a bullet to the head.”

Oleg raises an eyebrow and takes the file from me, thumbing through the paper leaves. Igor sees the situation is rapidly unraveling and starts panicking.

“This is a fucking joke!” he yells. “Oleg. I’ve known you for years. Surely, you can see this is a frame.”

A couple of the other *komissiya* members are perusing the file now. Oleg steps to Igor’s side, draws his gun, and presses it to Igor’s temple.

“Sit down and shut up,” he says. “Damn right, I can see it’s a frame, but you’re not the wronged party.”

Josie joins me, slipping her hand into mine. “Igor wanted to use Sasha to control the Kislev bratva,” she says, “but it was about vengeance, not power. He believes Sasha is responsible for his son’s death.”

Oleg’s eyebrows shoot up toward his hairline, and he addresses Igor. “You have a son?”

“I *had* a son!” Igor has lost all semblance of control, his eyes bulging as he rants. “Sasha lured him to the location, and Sergey shot him.” His voice is almost a shriek. “Somebody has to pay!”

Vlad speaks up. “Our father is dead too, Igor. He died horribly, and no one gave a shit. You didn’t have to be the one to issue a punishment; he got exactly what he deserved. No more, no less.” He puts a hand on my shoulder. “Sasha loved Rocco like a brother. How different things could have been if you’d chosen another path.”

Arman holsters his gun, and the guests follow suit. Relief floods the room, and Josie buries her face in my chest, breathing heavily.

“Oh my God,” she says. “I thought we were done for. Oh, Sasha. Can I breathe again? Will we be alright?”

I kiss her tenderly, hardly daring to believe this is real. My wife is safely in my arms, where she belongs. “Yes, *moya zhen*a. Better than alright.”

A couple of the bratva’s respected enforcers are keeping a close watch over Igor, who sways unsteadily in his chair as though he, too, can’t grasp what’s happening. The *komissiya* members seem satisfied with the evidence; now, all that remains is to decide his fate.

Igor looks up, his expression burning with loathing. He fixes his searing gaze on Josie.

“You’re still a dirty whore,” he says.



Josie

Igor's words are meaningless.

There was a time when I would have wanted to curl up and die because I thought it might be true. But whatever I once was, whatever I had to be—it's behind me now. I'm no longer someone to use, abuse, pay for, or disrespect. I'm Josephine Kisleva, and I'm proud of it.

Sasha's head whips around to look at Igor, and he grits his teeth. "Oleg, I want to kill him myself," he says, addressing the *komissiya's* leader-in-waiting. "I know it's not protocol. But this piece of shit murdered Sal Tosca and kept my wife prisoner, threatening her with rape and death if she didn't comply. That's on top of the plotting, blackmail, and betrayal that tarnishes our great institution."

Oleg nods. "There's someone else who has a voice in this matter. Someone go and fetch Claudia."

A minute later, Claudia appears from whatever part of the house she was sequestered. She's been crying.

"Miss Tosca," Oleg begins. "Sasha wants to kill Igor. It was your father who was murdered, so if you have an opinion, now's the time to—"

"Let Sasha kill him." Claudia's voice is steady and true. "Igor deserves to die for what he's done." She looks at me and Sasha. "I'm so sorry. I *do* need help, but I'm not crazy. Get me into rehab, please?"

Sasha smiles. "You're a mafia princess through and through, aren't you? Didn't even think twice. It was just, 'yeah, kill the fucker.'"

Claudia shrugs. "I'm sick of being pushed around by men. I'm not property. I'm a human being, even if I am a mess." She slides her anxious eyes to me. "Can you forgive me, Josie? I'm just a stupid kid. I wanna get clean and grow up."

"Of course," I say. "I understand how you feel. And Sasha *is* hard to get out of your head once he's in there."

She has the grace to look embarrassed. “Honestly, he was the first to be genuinely kind to me, and I think I took it to heart too much. I feel so dumb.”

“We’ve all been idiots over a crush. You were just...committed.”

She laughs. “I have been committed!”

Igor pipes up, incensed that we’re laughing as we discuss executing him. “Fuck you too, you little slut! No one will want you. And your precious Papa’s assets will be picked over like vultures at a carcass!”

Sasha lets go of my hand and, moving fast, punches Igor square in the face. His nose explodes, and he gives a low animal grunt, slumping in the chair.

“That felt good,” Sasha says, flexing his knuckles. “It’s a good question, though. What will happen to Tosca’s interests?”

“We’ll turn them over to you by way of apology,” Oleg says. “Claudia, you’ll be compensated too and remain under the *komissiya*’s protection. You can decide what you want to do with your life. But get clean first, okay?”

“Okay.” Claudia looks relieved. “Thank you, Oleg.”

“As for *you*,” Oleg points at the mumbling, bleeding Igor, “you are no *komissiya* leader nor a friend to the mafia or the *bratva*. Not a respected associate, an honored soldier, or a great man.” He spits his final dismissal. “You’re no one. Sasha?”

My husband looks at me, his eyes soft. He scans the room, taking in his brother, dear friend, and many allies and rivals.

“I could make a real thing of this,” he says, “but I’m not wasting another minute on this asshole. Vlad, hand me your pistol.”

Vlad obliges, and Sasha places the gun barrel between Igor’s eyes. He’s too beaten down to react.

“*Moya zhen*a, you get the last word.” He glances over his shoulder at me. “If you want this man to die here and now, all you have to do is say yes.”

I cross my arms. “How about *fuck* yes?”

“That’s my girl.”

Sasha fixes his eyes on Igor. “You won’t see Rocco where you’re going,” he says. “But if you run into my father, tell him from me to go fuck himself.”

The gunshot sets the chandelier rattling, and Igor crashes backward to the ground, taking the chair with him.



The nonchalance of these guys never fails to amaze me. I don’t know who made the call, but within minutes, four men in black overalls arrive and set about cleaning the murder scene. They roll Igor’s body in saran wrap, mop up the blood and gunk, and they’re gone like nothing ever happened.

Freddy has been dismissed with the standard shut-up-or-die bratva threats and a wad of cash. Vlad is a big believer in the carrot-and-stick theory and prefers to use both. Judging by the speed at which Freddy scuttled away, the strategy is sound.

Oleg decided to break up the party, saying we’d reconvene when the future of the *komissiya* had been agreed. A power vacuum is dangerous, and too many in the bratva would want to weigh in on the decision if they were allowed to stay.

We sit at the bar, with Arman serving as bartender. It seems everyone is in sore need of vodka, and it’s going down quickly, but I stick to seltzer.

“Vlad, how did you know what was going on?” Sasha asks.

Vlad nods at Arman. “This man is a fucking legend. After he got the info about the connection between Freddy and Tosca, he called me and said he suspected you were caught up in something. I asked him to keep tabs on you, but he did better than that—he got hold of the cunt who abducted Josie. Igor wasn’t careful about who he hired, probably because he planned to kill him afterward anyway, but Arman got to him first.”

“And I’ll bet he’s just fine, right?” Sasha grins at Arman. “Just told you what you needed to know without giving you trouble?”

Arman leans against the back of the bar and shrugs. “He didn’t know much. But I murdered him anyway.”

“Jesus!” Vlad says. “That’s not like you, *tovarishch*. What gives?”

Arman frowns. “I don’t like seeing women hurt. It’s beyond the fucking pale.”

I’m sure there’s one woman in particular whose absence is killing him, but I wouldn’t dream of outing him for it. I decide to do him a solid and move the conversation along.

“Leave it, Vlad. Arman told you the bits and pieces he knew. What did *you* do?”

“I safely left Morgana, Lili, Avel, and Dulcie in Tuscany and flew straight home. I met Arman, and we went to shake down Freddy, only to find him with his bags packed, evidence file included.” Vlad sips his drink. “So I gave him a couple of taps, and that’s all it took. The stupid asshole tried to get away with just handing over the file, but I thought you’d wanna see him, given what he’d tried to pull.”

Sasha slaps his hand on the bar. “Fuck, that was a lucky catch.”

“Nothing changes, *bratan*,” Vlad says with a grin. “I got your back. I knew it didn’t add up. And you’d have made a shit-awful pakhan anyway.”

“Agreed. So, before we get to that—Oleg. Anything to say to my wife?”

Oleg sighs. “I apologize. I was needlessly rude when we met. All this bullshit has taught me that a person’s background doesn’t account for anything when it comes to their integrity.” He holds up his hands. “Truce, Josephine Kisleva. Let’s begin again.”

I offer my hand, and Oleg shakes it. “Now,” he says, eager to move on, “we have the matter of the *komissiya* leadership. It’s mine by right, but I don’t want the top job; I’m too old. We need some younger blood.”

Everyone knows what he’s going to say. There can be no other.

“He means you, Vlad,” Sasha laughs. “Can you be head of the *komissiya* and lead our family?”

“Of course I fucking can.” Vlad finishes his drink and pours another. “But after this nightmare, I can’t see you hurling yourself back into the fray. So the

question is: what *are* you gonna do?”

“I’ll figure it out,” Sasha says, “but tomorrow is Christmas Eve. The future is a New Year kind of problem. We’ll get merry and bright tonight, and in the morning, you,” he points at Vlad, “need to jump back on that jet and bring everyone home, Dulcie included.” He grins broadly at me. “Because I sure as hell aren’t gonna cook the Christmas dinner!”



Two weeks later...

Sasha

Remodeling is hardly my forte, but I'm a quick learner, and finally, the end is in sight. I'm spattered head-to-toe in red, but for once, it's not blood. It's the ruby satin emulsion that Josie saw fit to choose for the restaurant's walls.

Tosca's asset list wasn't much to write home about, but I took a shine to this place. It was run-down, and the previous' owners' couldn't call a single inch of it their own; Tosca effectively bought the joint by lending them money they couldn't repay. We wrote it all off and gave them an above-market rate so the poor old bastards could retire home to Sicily in peace.

Josie has been gone a while, and familiar anxieties are flaring up. I don't know if I'll ever believe we're safe, but it doesn't matter—I'll always be ready to fuck someone up if they dare to mess with my wife. It was bad enough before she was pregnant, but now her curves are beginning to fill out, and I'm like a caveman. I totally understand why Vlad stuck to Morgana like glue for nine months, except when he came back to stand at my side and face the horror I'd accidentally wrought.

I'm removing the dust covers from the furniture when Josie rushes in, looking like a crazy person. "Oh my God!" she cries. "We have to get to the hospital, Sasha! Now!"

I haven't been out of the daily life of the *bratva* for long enough, and old habits die hard. "Why?" I reply. "Who's hurt? What happened?"

She laughs and pulls my arm. "No, no. Morgana's having the baby!"

I grab my phone from my pocket, and inevitably, there are eleven missed calls from Vlad. This is the problem with playing the radio so damn loud while I'm working.

"Everyone else is already there," Josie says as we head for the car. "We gotta hurry."

She takes out the keys, and I snatch them from her hand. "My wife may drive herself, but she sure as hell does not drive *me* anywhere. When I'm with you, I'm your chauffeur. Understood?"

We've had this debate a thousand times, and she understands just fine, but she likes to bring out my dominant side. I find as many ways as I can to remind her that I'll always protect her.



By the time we grind through the evening traffic, the drama is all over. The private maternity suite is quiet and tranquil, but our arrival breaks the peace, and it takes me a good five minutes to reassure the hysterical duty midwife that I haven't come fresh from a murder.

Morgana is in a comfortable room, which is more like a good hotel than a hospital, with a crib and double bed set up and ready so Vlad can stay. She sits in an easy chair, eating a burrito while Vlad holds his new baby daughter.

"*Madonna.*" Vlad's earlier panic has drained away, and he speaks as though hypnotized. "A little girl of my own, Sasha. Come and meet her."

"Vladi's head over heels in love," Morgana says, gazing adoringly at her husband. "Don't expect much sense out of him."

Josie sits beside Morgana, and I join Vlad at the window to meet the newest Kislev. She's wrapped in the receiving blanket Signora G made, and I feel warm inside when I remember the old lady's diligent knitting, day after day. Despite her bad memory, she got it done, wonky stitches and all. Her carers now are fantastic, and keeping her in her own home is worth every cent. I never told her what happened with Igor; she wouldn't have remembered it, but the pain would be real, and she deserves peace. She has been through enough.

"My girl's name is Stefania," Vlad says. "No other name was ever in the running." He hands the baby to me. "Careful, *brat.*"

The name suits this little princess. Her eyes are bright and alert, the same amber shade as her mom's. But she has the unmistakable, intense look of our Italian mother, Stefania. She'll be a heartbreaker, that's for sure.

I cradle her, her weight so slight in my arms. It's a good feeling, and I turn to watch my wife chatter to Morgana.

How blessed I am to have Josie in my life. It still frightens me to think how close we came to disaster. From what Josie told me, I would have suffered a contrived, supposedly accidental death, leaving Igor to raise my child and abuse my wife at his leisure.

Baby Stefania is falling asleep. I hand her back to his father, watching my brother's face as I do so. He's smitten, and I know he'll be the polar opposite of our own father. Despite the hard work of running our family and the *komissiya*, Vlad is more than up to adding parenting to the mix; the man has boundless patience. I should know.

Lilyana and Avel enter the room, wrestling with flowers and a ridiculous pacifier-shaped helium balloon. Arman is bringing up the rear, looking flustered.

"So these two jokers wanted to bring you presents," he says to Morgana, "but they got a bit carried away."

Avel tries arranging the bouquet in a cardboard bedpan, which makes Morgana laugh. "Nothing to do with me," he says. "Lili was the one who went overboard. Not my fault if Arman can't refuse her a damn thing."

I take in the smiling faces, and I'm hit by boundless gratitude. I love all these people so much. They accepted my decision to step away from the *bratva*, and they did so with grace and understanding.

I finally believe in my value, and my incredible wife is the reason. She made me confront the lies I used to tell myself, the bullshit that kept my walls up and my heart protected. Faced with her warm heart and patient, gentle soul, my resistance was futile. She taught me more than she'll ever know, and I'm grateful every day.

Morgana yawns. "I need some rest, guys," she says. "Lili. Aren't you late to meet Sebastian? I thought the concert was tonight?"

Arman huffs air out of his nostrils, and I catch a flare of annoyance on his face. No one else notices.

"Yep!" Lili trills. "Avel is coming too. He wants to see if I have any attractive classmates. And Arman is gonna drive us."

I glance at him. “You going on this Juilliard school trip, too?”

“No.” He raises an eyebrow. “But I’m gonna wait outside in the car until they’re done.”

So Arman doesn’t trust Avel not to go off with a girl and leave Lilyana to fend for herself. He’s going too far with his concern for her—she’ll be with friends, after all—but I’m not gonna get into that with him.

Because it’s also Dulcie’s night off. That means Josie and I will be home alone for a few hours.

“Come on, *zlotse*.” I reach for my wife’s hand and help her to her feet. “Let’s leave the new parents in the nest. I’ve been painting all day, and I’m bushed.”

She ruffles my hair playfully. “So you finally learned which way to hold a paintbrush? That’s good, baby. Now, if you can just master a *hairbrush*—”

“—and with that, we’re out of here,” I say, interrupting. We get the goodbyes out of the way, and as we close the door behind us, I grab her waist, pulling her to me.

It’s been too long. Josie’s pregnancy nausea is only just easing off, and I’m not enough of a bastard to hassle her for sex when she’s been feeling so ill. An empty house is too good an opportunity to waste, and the thought of filling the place with her screams is enough to make me feral.

“You know exactly what that kind of sass will get you,” I murmur, kissing her neck. Josie pulls back and gives me a wicked grin.

“I sure hope so.”



Josie

As soon as we're inside the house, Sasha is upon me, his hands everywhere. It seems as though he might wrestle me to the floor and fuck me there, but he breaks away and stares into my eyes, breathing heavily.

"Upstairs." He pushes me ahead of him, swatting my ass as I go. "I don't wanna wreck you. Not yet, anyway."

He swoops me into his arms as we enter our suite, tossing me onto the bed. Then he's straddling me, pinning me with his bulk. He holds my wrists, keeping my hands above me as his eyes roam over my body.

"What to do, what to do." He leans over so he can whisper in my ear. "I want you too much. I might do a lot, and I'm liable to get freaky with it. I've missed your body."

"You went months without sex before we got together," I say. He moves to kiss me, and I catch his lip ring in my teeth, tugging it before releasing him. "Are you really suffering so bad?"

Sasha releases my hands and sits back on his heels, his expression so solemn that I can't help but laugh. "That was before I'd had a taste of you," he says. "Now that you're mine forever, you'd think I could deal, but I can't. Forever isn't enough time. I could never get enough."

I'm reminded of those early days when Sasha forced me to marry him, only to find his desire was making a fool of him. So much has happened since then, but I'm gratified to discover that my husband's sexual interest in me only seems to increase.

Sure, he respects and loves me, supports my dreams, cares for my needs, and protects me with his life. But he also touches me whenever he can, hugs me in passing, kisses me many times a day, and, above all, fucks me like my body is paradise. I always thought I was nothing more than a thing for a man to own, but he treats me like a treasure, a diamond. A priceless jewel worth more than every dollar of his immense wealth.

And because of all that, he can't deny me anything.

“Hey.” I shift my hips beneath him, and he gives a low growl. “I have an idea. Do you wanna do *that* thing?”

Sasha’s eyes widen in shock. “Seriously? Yes. I wanna break in your pretty ass. Is that what my gorgeous wife wants?”

“Yes.” I sit up on my elbows. “I wanna make *you* beg. You were such a dick to me when we were first married, trying to get me to debase myself and plead for your cock. It’s got to be my turn.” I pout, tilting my head. “C’mon. Spoil me.”

He stares at me. “Fucking right, I’ll spoil you. By the time I’m through, you’ll be ruined. Come dripping from every hole, aching, filthy.” He smirks. “But I always said I was willing to compromise. And, of course, that means my wife gets what she wants.” His hand steals under my sweater, and finding me braless, he pinches my nipple. “What do you want, *zlotse*? I’m at your service.”

I shiver as he tweaks my breast, sending sparks of pleasure to my core. “I don’t want to restrain you,” I say. “I want you to control *yourself*. You did it before, and it was the hottest thing. Let me do what I want, and don’t touch me or move. Can you do that?”

“I can,” he replies, his voice determined. He’s undoubtedly rising to the challenge, so to speak; his paint-spattered jeans might split at the seams if he doesn’t strip soon. “But I have something for you first.”

I agree, and he reluctantly climbs off my prone body and retrieves a velvet bag from the closet. Inside is a teardrop of sea-green glass, topped off at the wide end with an ornate molding of a mermaid sitting on a rock.

“Is this fucking weird?” Sasha asks. “I bought it on a whim, but when I look at it now, it seems such an odd sentiment.”

I giggle. “We both know it’s a butt plug, Sasha. I won’t be keeping it on the mantel if that’s what you mean, but it’s beautiful.”

He grins. “Enjoy looking at it now because you won’t see it for long.” He sets the plug down beside me and reaches for my zipper. “Here’s the deal. Let me get that pussy and ass warmed up. You can enjoy your cock-teasing games until you take pity on me, or I get too fucking worked up to play nice

anymore.” He tugs off my pants and underwear, throwing them on the floor. “And then I’m gonna fuck you everywhere and finish in your tight little asshole. Got it?”

He’s not really asking. I know damn well that my husband will make me pay for my teasing, and *he* knows that’s why I want to do it. There’s no way I’m getting out of this without being fucked ragged—that’s the whole point.

Sasha rolls me onto my front, pulling off my sweater as he does so. He strips quickly, and I look over my shoulder to watch as his thick cock springs free of its denim prison. It seems bigger than ever, dewy and glistening at the tip, and I lick my lips.

“Don’t you worry,” he says, kneeling behind me. He grabs my hips, hauling me onto all fours. “I’m happy to fuck your mouth because I know you love how I taste. But maybe another time.”

His breath is hot on my skin. In a swift movement, he licks me from clit to asshole, covering me in saliva, and I quiver with bliss. My pussy is primed for his attention, juicy, and already opening up to his touch.

“Hmm.” He slips his middle finger into my pussy, moaning with satisfaction as my inner walls squeeze it. “I think you’ve missed me. You’re so wet, and I’ve barely touched you.” He pumps his finger in and out firmly, and I push back, trying to force him deeper. He slaps my ass, then bites the flesh, making me squeal.

“Ow! Sasha, that hurts!”

He massages my stinging butt cheek. “Good. You gotta let me have these little things, my love.” He licks my asshole again, and I gasp. “It’s only because I can’t say no to you that I’m prepared to let you run the show.”

I feel the warmth of his spit as he works my tiny hole, getting it as wet as he can. “Spoiled,” he says between licks. “I spoil you too damn much. But I’ll never, ever stop.”

I’m beyond speech, my mouth a soundless void. The sensation is so intense and new. Sasha nudges the tip of his index finger into my sensitive asshole, and I drop my head and shoulders onto the bed, burying my face in my arm.

“Oh, Sasha. Go easy.”

“I’m gonna go real carefully, *zolutse*,” he says, his voice like velvet. “You’re doing so well. You relax now.” He begins moving both fingers, one in my ass and one in my pussy, and I roll my head, moaning.

It’s so good. I feel so full already, and he’s nowhere near done with me.

He picks up the plug with his free hand and reaches forward, brushing it against my cheek. “Open up,” he says. “Suck this. I’m dying to watch it disappear into your ass.”

I do as I’m told, and the cold glass slides smoothly over my tongue. He holds his fingers in place inside me, and I clutch at them with my strong muscles as he pushes the plug to the back of my throat. I gag, coughing, and he rewards me with a firm shove of his hand, forcing a cry from me and opening my throat wider. I heave in a breath as he wrenches the plug from my mouth, smiling with satisfaction at my streaming eyes.

“I’ll get you for that,” I gasp.

Sasha laughs and returns to his kneeling position behind me, removing his fingers from my holes. I groan in irritation, but the sound is cut off by the feel of the slick glass against my now-swollen asshole.

“Breathe out when I say so,” he commands. “This is going all the way in one push because you’re a brave girl, and you can take it.” He rubs me with the plug, teasing the tip into my smallest hole. “You’re a good girl, Josie. *My good girl*. Ready? Breathe out now.”

I blow the air out between my pursed lips and let it happen. The glass is cool and relentlessly hard, with no give at all, and it forges past the tight ring of muscle easily with Sasha’s guidance. He gives a throaty growl deep in his chest as the broadest part eases inside, and with a sudden release of tension, my asshole closes around the slim base.

Sasha is still for a moment, admiring the view of the glass mermaid peeking coyly from the valley of my butt. He slaps the plug, making it jiggle in my depths and lighting up nerves that have never been touched before.

“That’s fucking beautiful,” he says. “And now, *moya zhená*—a deal’s a deal. What are you gonna do to me?”

I gingerly change position, sitting on the edge of the bed. The plug is so *there*, impossible to ignore, but the fullness feels incredible.

“Come and lie on your back,” I say, “with your hands under you.”

He does as I ask without hesitation. It’s quite the thrill to have this huge, sexy man at my mercy. He grins impishly, his erection twitching, and I marvel at my good fortune to be able to call Sasha Kislev mine.

I climb onto the bed and straddle him, rubbing my soaking pussy along his length. He closes his eyes and drops his head into the pillow. “You’re gonna tease the fuck out of me, aren’t you?” he murmurs. “I regret everything.”

I laugh, moving my hips more vigorously. “You’re not tied down. You could break your promise anytime, and I could do nothing about it.”

“I know.” He bites his lip, pulling the ring. “But I’m not letting you win that easily.”

We’ll see about that.

I lower my weight onto Sasha, enjoying the heat of his cock nestled between my pussy lips. I slide him through, letting his pierced tip catch my clit, then all the way back. The head of his cock rubs against my entrance, and I struggle to resist plunging him into me. I reach for my clit, continuing to grind as I massage the turgid little bud.

Sasha is losing it. He doesn’t move his hands, but the tendons in his neck are standing out, and he lifts his hips, trying to get the leverage he needs to fuck his cock into me. I stop grinding and cross my arms.

“Nuh-uh.” I slap his chest. “You stop that now.”

He frowns, and for a moment, I think he’s gonna snatch his hands around my waist and pound me raw. Then he smiles.

“Argh.” He closes his eyes. “Alright. I’ll be a good boy.”

I don't know why, but hearing him say that is so hot. He couldn't be a good boy if his life depended on it, and that's fine by me.

I catch the tip of him with my pussy, slipping the head inside, and he lets loose a long, tortured moan. It occurs to me that his girth will be more of a challenge than ever because of the plug in my ass bearing down on him, but I don't care. I want to feel that almost painful fullness more than anything in the world.

I lift my body and spin around to face Sasha's feet.

"Oh yeah," he says. "That's a hell of a view. What a slutty angel you are."

I assume a squat position. My pussy is too juicy to offer any resistance, and I slide onto Sasha's cock slowly, inch by thick, hot inch. The plug in my ass shifts to accommodate him, and by the time he's all the way in, I'm overwhelmed by sensation. My husband's cock throbs heatedly in my pussy, and combined with the firm smoothness of the glass plug in my asshole, it's almost too much.

I start to move again, moving him slowly in and out of me. My thighs burn with the exertion, but it only adds to the molten pleasure that suffuses my body with an exquisite blend of ecstasy and pain.

"Josie." Sasha sounds like he shares my blissful agony. "Speed up. I'm going crazy here. Fuck me harder."

"No," I gasp out. "You can wait." I pull him out of me and grind on him again, rubbing my clit firmly against his piercing. "I thought you could keep control."

His hands on me are so rough that it makes me jump. He pushes me off him, and I land on my front. He moves too fast for me to stop him, and he pins me flat with his whole body, his fist snatching a handful of my hair.

"Fuck control," he growls. "You *want* me to lose it. And my wife gets what she wants."



Sasha

My hand closes around the plug's base, and I jiggle it. Josie moans into the duvet, and I feel a surge of savage satisfaction.

I'm so fucking ready for this. She's tormented me into a state I've never been in before, and all I want is to ruin her. I don't know how it's even possible for the woman I deeply love and respect to make me wanna use her this way, but I'm on board.

I grasp my cock and line up with her pussy, shoving deep into her with one rough thrust. She cries out, and I yank her hair, pulling her head back. My hand wraps her throat, constricting her noises as I sling my hips, fucking her hard.

Jesus. The plug is heavy, and in this position, gravity is at work, giving me less space to fuck her. Josie's pussy is already tight, but this is something else. I grit my teeth, urging myself not to come.

"Get back on that clit," I say, stilling my movements. She pushes her arm beneath her body, and I feel her fingers brushing the sensitive area. "I'm gonna pull the plug out."

I release her hair and take hold of the plug, tugging gently at first, then more firmly. Josie is a quick learner, and before I can say anything, I realize she's already relaxing her fluttering muscles, letting the plug slip free.

Her asshole is rosy and swollen, and she sighs as I rub it, easing the soreness. I spit, letting the saliva drop onto her tender hole, and I fuck it into her with my finger, readying her for me.

My wife's pussy doesn't want to give up my cock, and it's a wrench to pull free of her clutching depths, but I have somewhere else to go. My length is slippery with her wetness, and I slide along the valley between her butt cheeks, getting everything good and lubed up.

Josie whimpers and moans, her throat spasming beneath my palm. I lean forward and kiss her ear.

“Every inch of you belongs to me.” I press my cock to her ass, feeling it give way, and she mewls with pleasure as I slide home. “This perfect little asshole is mine, your tight pussy is mine. Who is fucking your asshole for the first time in your life?”

“You are,” she croaks. “You’re fucking my ass, Sasha. And it feels so good. Please go harder.”

I don’t need to be asked twice, but I can’t go all out in this position. I pull out and roll her onto her back, picking up her legs and folding her so her knees are by her ears.

“There,” I say, jerking off idly as I speak. “Now you can reach your clit, I can watch, and I have room to fuck your ass as hard as I want. What’s not to love?” I hold her thighs, pushing them wide apart as I slide back into her tender asshole. “You’re gonna need to get those nipple piercings redone, and your lip ring too. You play with my hardware, so I say let’s even up the playing field.” I pinch her nipples firmly as I give her a firm thrust, and her eyes widen in shock.

“Oh God. That’s so deep.” Her fingers fly to her clit, and her pussy floods, her lubrication running into the crack of her ass. “I’m gonna come so damn hard. Fuck me, please.”

She’s not the only one. My orgasm is biting my heels and has been since she first started teasing me. If I chase it, I might fuck her hard enough to smash the bed through the floor, but I don’t give a shit.

“Make noise,” I say, picking up the pace. “The house is empty, so I wanna hear you. Fill the place with your beautiful cock-hungry cries.”

She gives me a lewd smile. “When you come, will you choke me into silence?”

This woman can’t be for real. I’ve never been sure whether or not I believe in God, but I sure as hell believe in the Devil because that guy just has to be responsible for this kind of depraved bliss.

“Whatever you want, *zlotse*.” I grip her thighs harder as I pump my hips, getting a solid rhythm going. “Now work that clit and come for me.”

Josie's throaty moans build into loud cries of rapture as I rail her ass. Her fingers dance over her clit, ever faster, and I feel my climax gathering.

"Oh, fuck, Sasha! I'm gonna come. You feel so incredible in my ass. Keep fucking my tight asshole!"

I should have realized how much her dirty talk would turn me on. I'm at the point of no return, and I grab her throat and kiss her roughly.

"Come," I gasp, feeling my own release hurtling toward me. "Come *now*, Josie. I'm gonna fill your ass, and I can't hold off."

Josie screams into my mouth as she peaks, her asshole contracting as she milks my come from me. I roar with relief and ecstasy as I feel the pent-up tension drain from my body into hers.

It takes a good couple of minutes for the feeling to return to my legs, and I ease out, rolling onto my back beside her. I pull the duvet over us before our sweat cools too much.

"I think we need a shower," Josie says breathily. "You have paint in your hair."

"You," I roll onto my elbow and kiss her nose, "have red marks on your neck and come leaking out of your asshole. Oh, and spit and pussy juice basically everywhere. You're calling *me* dirty?"

She drops a kiss onto my smiling lips. "You *are* dirty. But I wouldn't change you."



We sit on the terrace, bundled in blankets. It's freezing, especially with our hair still wet from the shower, but the breeze is light and fresh, and the patio heater takes the edge off.

"Do you think you can get used to being the wife of a chef?" I ask.

Josie tilts her head, considering the question. "Well, you're still a billionaire, which helps. But I wouldn't care if you weren't. I didn't know who you were

inside, Sasha. If I'd known you had it in you to love me, I'd never have gotten engaged to Marc."

"Oh, that reminds me, *zlotse*." I kiss the back of her hand. "Daddy Bonneville was most embarrassed by his late son's so-called gambling debts, so he agreed to pay back the casinos concerned to avoid publicity. As you know, those debts were fabricated by me in the first place, so I insisted he pay the balance to charity instead."

Josie's mouth drops open. "How much? And what charity?"

"Three billion dollars," I reply. "To *your* charity." Josie stares at me uncomprehendingly, and I laugh. "You have a dream. To bring books and a love of reading to children in care. So I set it up for you, above board and not connected to Kislev enterprises whatsoever. As far as anyone knows, Bonneville Senior donated start-up capital to a fledgling children's reading program. Who knew he was so kind?"

Josie hurls herself onto my lap, smothering me with kisses. "You're crazy," she exclaims through happy tears. "There's so much for me to do, to set up—oh, Sasha. Thank you. So much."

I pull her head to my shoulder. "For you, *moya zhena*? Anything."

EPILOGUE



Six months later...

Josie

All we're doing is strolling through my old neighborhood. But I'm so nervous.

Something is wrong—Sasha has spent the whole morning playing it off like we're just going to lunch, but that's not it. He won't be drawn and swears up and down he's fine, but he's never been able to hide from me, and today is no exception.

Sasha stops me on the sidewalk and draws a deep breath. "Please forgive me for what's about to happen. I don't know if you'll be happy or freak out, but I'm betting on both."

I look at the building beside us and see where we are. *Astor Trattoria*. The place where Mom and I shared our gnocchi.

My eyes fill with tears. I never told Sasha the name of the place. How did he *know*?

Inside, the restaurant seems empty, but I scan the space again and notice someone sitting at a table near the window. I can't see her well, but she looks our way, and my stomach drops.

"Sasha," I whisper. "What's happening?"

Sasha grips my hand tightly. "Remember when I told you I'd find the drug-pushing asshole who got your mom dealing? Well, I looked into it, found him, and had him taken care of. But I didn't just find him. I found *her*."

I'm no longer listening. Time and space have ground to a halt, and I'm thirteen again, trying desperately to wake up my Mom.

The woman stands, and I know for sure. She's not a ghost, a hallucination, or a doppelganger. This middle-aged lady *is* Mom. She reaches her arms to me, and I collapse into her, sobbing.

How can she be here? Her embrace is like a balm to my grieve-stricken soul, a reprieve I never thought possible. I cannot stop myself from burying my face in her shoulder, breathing her in as though she might vanish into mist, leaving me alone again.

“Mom,” I whisper. “Mommy. Where were you? I needed you so much.”

“I’m sorry, baby, I’m so sorry.” Mom is crying, too. “I was in a coma for two weeks after I overdosed. When I woke up, a social worker told me you didn’t want to see me again, and a care order had been granted to a foster family. I was arrested on drug dealing charges and jailed again.”

When Sasha speaks, it gives me a start. I’d forgotten he was there at all.

“Arman dug it all up, *zlotse*. The social worker was sourcing kids for sickos like the Ellis’s in return for substantial kickbacks. It was her who told you your mom was dead, right?”

The memory hits me hard. *He’s right*. That woman, her face impassive, coolly informed me my mom had coded during the night.

“Holy shit,” I say, nodding. Mom and I sit opposite each other, and Sasha sits beside me. “So, how long was your second stretch?”

Mom bows her head. “I didn’t fight for myself. The CPS said they would not entertain any contact until I was out in any case, but as you didn’t want to see me, they refused to help. I became very depressed, and the courts made mincemeat out of me. No appeals, no deals, and no hot meals.” She smiles. “But I got clean. Kept my head down, earned an early years teaching qualification, and got through it. When I was released, I used the little money I had to bribe a CPS records clerk to tell me where you were.”

My heart aches for her. I was so alone, so afraid, and needed her so much. Yet she’d been lied to, made to believe I didn’t want her in my life, and was better off with a new family.

“I came by the Ellis’s house on your sixteenth birthday,” Mom continues, her eyes spilling over again, “but they said you’d moved on and didn’t know where you were. The police didn’t make much effort, but I never stopped hoping. I couldn’t get a job as a teacher because of my felony record, so I went back to cleaning, and I live in a shared house not far from here.”

She puts her hand over mine. “ I wanted to stay near the places we loved, Josie. Walk the streets we walked and just *feel* you. My life was nothing without you in it, but no matter how much I was hurting, I never touched the drugs again.”

I glance at Sasha. He gives a slight shake of his head, and I understand—he hasn’t enlightened my mother to the full horror of what I went through. It’s my story, and we’ll get to it one day, but now is not the time.

“I never thought for a moment you might be alive,” I say. “Why would I? I got into trouble, Mom. Fell in with bad people.”

Mom gestures at Sasha. “I know! Imagine what I thought when this big bratva man came to my door? But he showed me your photo and told me you were his wife. I couldn’t believe it. Thought he was scamming me somehow.”

Sasha laughs. “She gave me a hard time. I see where you get your fiery streak from.”

“Sasha and I have a few things in common.” Mom smiles at my husband. “Once he started talking about you, I knew he was for real. He loves you so much. I was happy to know you were alright but afraid you might not want me in your life.”

It doesn’t feel real. My mom, alive and well, sitting before me. It’s as though not a single day has passed since I last saw her. We were here just hours before everything went to hell, and now we’re back.

“Of course I want you.” I pat my modest bump. “My baby needs a grandma. And I need my mom.”

A server comes over, carrying a gigantic bowl. I’m about to say we haven’t seen a menu yet, but he speaks first.

“The restaurant is only open for your party, and your food was pre-ordered,” he says. “Enjoy.”

He places the gnocchi dish on the table, along with three smaller plates, and Sasha digs the spoon in, serving up the food.

“I never once came here without you, Josie. It was too hard.” Mom closes her eyes as she chews. “But they make the best gnocchi ever.”

“When it comes to excellent Italian food, I’d reserve judgment if I were you,” I say, nudging Sasha. “My husband’s restaurant may be small, but he’s getting rave reviews. It was in the *New Yorker*,” I wave a hand in the air, “*Piccolo Cuoco* is the new Mediterranean dining experience to savor.”

Mom looks suitably impressed. “Why that name? Is it something meaningful?”

Sasha nods. “Very meaningful, yes. Someone who loved me used to call me that.”

A quiet moment passes in memory of Sasha’s mother, who loved her children fiercely and never let her circumstances hold her down.

We chat over seltzer water and good food. Mom looks younger every minute, as though the mere sight of me has taken years off her.

I don’t know what I did to deserve a second chance, but Sasha ensured I got it. How could I ever have considered trading my happiness for safety when Sasha gives me more of both than I could ever need?



Eventually, we put Mom in a cab home, with a promise to meet her tomorrow and take her to view properties. We showed her the photos of our new riverside apartment—modest, by Sasha’s standards, but perfect for a little family just starting out. She cooed over them until Sasha casually said he would buy one for her, which led to their first in-law argument. Sasha won in the end, and Mom eventually got excited at the prospect of a beautiful home a stone’s throw from me and the baby.

Our cab pulls up outside the obstetrician’s office, and Sasha helps me out, catching me as I sway.

“Steady,” he says, concerned. “Is your center of gravity thrown off by food?”

“It’s thrown by *your* child,” I laugh, holding onto his arm. “I’m not made of glass, you know. You don’t have to fuss.”

Sasha wrinkles his nose. “Yes, I do. You two,” he strokes my stomach, “are the most precious people in the world. If I don’t look after you, who will?”

He’s right, of course. And he means it—he’s more than made his point.

Sasha’s edge will always be there. You can take the man out of the bratva, but you can’t take the bratva out of the man. I’m confident he could be in his kitchen, cheerfully sautéing scallops, and then the next minute, the spatula will be through someone’s head. But only if they look at me in a way that displeases him.

I try not to squeeze Sasha’s hand as we sit side by side in the waiting room, but a cold roll of fear makes the food sit heavy. Every scan is terrifying to me. After everything we went through, I have check-ups regularly, but now that I think about it, I don’t know when I last felt the baby move.

We don’t wait for long. Dr. Conn calls us through, and I assume the position on the examining couch, lifting my shirt in readiness for the ultrasound wand. A chilly squirt of KY jelly, and she’s away, moving the sensor over my skin.

“Your baby is very still today,” she says. Her voice is steady, but a tiny line appears between her brows. “Let me see if I can get some movement going here.”

I can see the heartbeat, but it’s fluttery, strange. At this stage, my baby should be wriggling all the time, but there’s nothing to see, and Dr. Conn’s prods are to no avail. I start crying quietly, and Sasha stands closer so I can lean on him. He’s so tense that he feels like a statue.

“Give me a minute,” the doctor says. She leaves the room abruptly, and panic rises in my throat.

No. Not after everything we’ve been through. I can’t get Mom back and lose my baby on the same day. Surely that’s not how the universe works?

Sasha pulls up a chair and sits, leaning forward until his face is near my stomach. He speaks softly, his words warm and coaxing.

“*Moye ditya*,” he murmurs. “*Il mio bambino*. You’re scaring your Mama, little one. Wake up.”

I almost jump out of my skin as the baby gives an almighty kick, almost clocking Sasha in the jaw. “Takes after me,” he says with a grin. “Sorry about that.”

We’re both laughing when the doctor returns with a colleague in tow. She checks again with the ultrasound, sighing with relief at the sight of the baby tossing and turning happily.

“Oh, thank goodness,” she says. Her colleague ducks out again, glad not to be involved. “He gave us all quite the scare!” She claps her hand over her mouth. “Oh no. I’m sorry. I didn’t think.”

We didn’t want to find out the gender until the birth. I search Sasha’s face, wondering if he’s angry, but he’s too happy to care. He speaks to my bump again.

“So now we know.” He catches my eye. “Did you mean what you said before when we discussed baby names? Because if you did, I want to be the first to say it.”

I nod. “Of course I meant it. Go ahead. I love you.”

He kisses me deeply. “Thank you, *moya zhen*a. I love you too.” He puts his hand over my belly. “And we love you *most*, Rocco.”

EPILOGUE



The following Christmas Eve....

Sasha

“**Y**ou’re sure you’re alright?” Josie says into her cell. It’s the third time she’s called Morgana in an hour. “We don’t need to hurry back? Okay. Well, we won’t be long anyway. See ya.” She hangs up. “Apparently, Rocco is still asleep.”

“*Zolotse*, he’s not yet four months old. All he does is sleep, eat, and look adorable. And the other thing, but I usually run away from that.” I take the gift bags from her. “Morgana and Dulcie, versus two babies? They’ll be just fine.”

“One of those babies is your niece,” she reminds me. “And she’s a force to be reckoned with.”

It’s true. At almost a year old, little Stefania is precocious, to say the least. She’s been able to toddle around for a few weeks now, and every Christmas tree in the house has come under fire, but apart from a few ill-gotten candy canes, there have been no confirmed casualties.

We’re getting around in style today. I borrowed a limousine and driver from the pool system we have going now—it’s one of Vlad’s many innovations since he took leadership of the *komissiya*. It became clear that our anointed overseers spent most of their time drinking and pontificating instead of doing their jobs. Vlad’s ascension really shook them up for the better. As a result of my brother’s bright ideas, I don’t have to drive, but I’m honored to carry my wife’s Christmas shopping.

We dump the parcels and bags in the trunk of the car. It’s starting to snow, so luckily, we won’t be out much longer, but our last stop of the day is the most important of all.



The small library is packed. Every chair is taken, and people stand around, making space as others shuffle in. All they need is Josie.

Josie's mom insists I call her Barb. She's already here, helping keep the younger kids occupied with songs. They're finishing an out-of-tune rendition of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer when Josie sits beside her mom.

The kids are from orphanages and foster placements all over the city. This is the eighth session Josie and her mom have held here in the last month, and it will be the last before the charity restarts its literacy program in the New Year. It took a lot of work to get the community on board, but Josie's background in the care system goes a long way to help these youngsters relate to her, and once again, she's doing what she loves: bringing the wonderful escapism of books to children in need.

Josie does the kindergarten teacher's finger-on-lips move, and the kids fall into line. She smiles as the room quietens, and I see the peace in her eyes.

This makes my wife happy, so it makes *me* happy, too.

Barb hands Josie a copy of a familiar book.

"Ready?" she asks the room. The kids nod, and Josie opens the book to the first page.

"Every Who down in Whoville liked Christmas a lot..." she begins. "But the Grinch, who lived just north of Whoville," she pauses for dramatic effect, "Did NOT!"

The kids giggle, and I feel warm inside. My mother read that book to me when I was young. Vlad didn't care for it, but I loved the lilting, comforting rhymes, and Mama and I would laugh over the illustrations and do silly voices.

I blocked that out for so long, not wanting to remember the good times for fear of stoking the flames of my grief. Now, I can sit with sadness and be glad I had her in my life.

Grief cannot hurt without love. I appreciate both, and I'm thankful for what I have.

Josie and Barb take turns to read, getting the kids involved, and a few stories and songs later, we're ready to call it a day. The kids get a gift bag, each with candy and a book token, paid for by the charity's fund. They plan to scale up to a national scheme, and Josie is hustling hard to get politicians and policymakers on board. I'm proud of her, and I tell her every day.

Josie appears at my side. She's full of the exhilaration and joy that her work gives her, and it gives me great pleasure to see her so happy.

"Okay!" she says. "All good. Let's go to the Kislev homestead and settle in before the snow strands us here! Although," she adds, a twinkle of mischief in her eye, "it wouldn't be the end of the world. I've had a lot of fun in libraries."



Predictably, the house is mayhem. Vlad has given up trying to keep order, and I find him in the kitchen, trying to keep Signora G out of the panettone.

"But I like it!" she says, cutting a slice. "Who are you to tell me what to do?"

"Sasha, help." Vlad laughs as he sees me. "This old lady is lovely, but she's eating everything!"

I'm delighted. Signora G got way too thin, but in the last few months, she put a load of weight back on, and thanks to her carer's diligent efforts, she got out of the house more and more. But it was Josie and Morgana who eventually coaxed her here for Christmas, promising her excellent food and cute babies to play with. It's wonderful to see her here in my family home.

"*Brat*, I *made* the panettone, so I say she can have it." Signora G blows me a kiss and retreats to the lounge, carrying her plate. She no longer needs my help to walk. "Did I miss anything?" I ask.

"Your son hasn't caused any trouble," Vlad replies. "Stefania, on the other hand...well, let's just say I'm in my wife's bad books. I took my eye off my daughter for half a minute, and she got under the tree. Some of the presents look like a pack of wild dogs tried to open them."

I burst into laughter. "But other than that, all good?"

He nods. “Lilyana is out again with her boyfriend. She was gonna bring him to meet us, but they were not getting on so well, so she changed her mind. Arman and Avel are up on the terrace getting steadily drunk, and I intend to get on that too once the little people are asleep.”

We head through to the lounge, where Josie sits beside Morgana. Both women have their babies on their knees, and while Rocco quietly drinks his milk, Stefania plays peekaboo with her mom. I sit between them, and Josie drops her head onto my shoulder.

“I’ll bet you’re glad you took the night off,” she says. “Marco is a great sous chef. Always ready to step up.”

I love my restaurant, but she’s right—we’re booked solid all night, and at first, I wouldn’t consider stepping back. But my second-in-command is a pro, and he relishes a challenge.

I love being a chef, but food doesn’t love me back. Not like my family does.

“There’s nowhere I’d rather be than here with you,” I say. “Are you hungry? There’s tons to eat.”

She shakes her head. “I have baby weight to shift. Can’t overindulge.”

I hold out my arms, and Josie hands Rocco to me. He has that cute milk-drunk look, and I put him on my shoulder, wondering if the back of my shirt will survive. He lets loose with a surprisingly loud belch and snuggles into the crook of my neck. I give Josie a look of mock outrage, and she laughs.

“I am going to put *moy malysh* here to bed.” I arch an eyebrow. “And you, beloved wife of mine, are going to get a plate and enjoy yourself. I worship every inch of you, and whether there’s more or less to love makes no difference.”

Josie stands and kisses Rocco’s soft head. “*Schastlivogo Rozhdestva, Buon Natale*, and Merry Christmas to you, baby angel.” She wraps her arms around us and rests her forehead on mine.

Josie is everything I never knew I wanted. My wife reached beyond my wounded heart and her fear, bringing forth a better man. The one I want to be and the one she deserves.

I never knew what bliss life could be.

“I love you, Sasha,” Josie whispers.

“I love you too, *moya zhena.*”

THE END

ALSO BY CARA BIANCHI

Read all my books for FREE in Kindle Unlimited or buy on Amazon.

Join my mailing list [here](#) for a free forced marriage mafia romance novel, Married To My Mafia Boss!

You'll also get exclusive updates about upcoming books in the Angels & Brutes series!

Angels & Brutes

1 - [Ruined Beauty](#)

East Coast Bratva

1 - [Depraved Royals](#)

2 - [Twisted Sinner](#)

3 - [Vicious Hearts](#)

Novellas

[Saint Nikolai \(Christmas short\)](#)

MAILING LIST

Join my mailing list and get a free spicy mafia romance novel, Married To My Mafia Boss.

You'll also be the first to hear the latest Cara news!

[Click here to join!](#)



Connect with Me!

Follow me on Amazon here: [Follow me](#)

Find me on Instagram - @carabianchiwrites

Find me on TikTok - @carabianchiwrites

RUSSIAN AND ITALIAN PHRASES

The Kislevs are half-Italian and half-Russian, and as such, tend to use both of these languages in addition to English.

Russian is written phonetically in this book, for ease of reading. Any phrase or word used in the story but *not* listed here will be translated in dialogue on the page.

Russian Phrases

bozhe moy! - my God!

brat - brother

bratan - 'bro'

da - yes

dobroye utro - good morning

dobryy vecher - good evening

komandir - boss/commander

lisichka - little fox

mladshiy brat - little brother

moye ditya - my child

moy malysh - my baby son

moya zhena - my wife

nyet - no

priyatel' - buddy

Schastlivogo Rohzdesta! - Merry Christmas!

tovarishch - comrade

zlotse - darling

Italian Phrases

angel prezioso - precious angel

bella - beautiful

buonasera - good evening

Buon Natale - Merry Christmas

capo - boss

cara - dear

certemente - certainly

Dio sia lodato - God be praised

grazie - thank you

il mio bambino - my baby

Madonna! - an exclamation, similar to 'my God!'

mio Dio - my God

mio prezioso - my precious

piccolo cuoco - little cook

prego - you're welcome

RUSSIAN PATRONYMICS

It's customary in Russia to use patronymics derived from the father's given name.

Middle names end with -ovich or -evich. The female patronymics end in -ovna or -evna.

Most surnames end in -ov or -ev. Surnames derived from given male names are common. Female forms of this type of surnames end in -ova or -eva.

For example, male members of the Kislev family are formally known by the same middle name, Sergeyevich, and the surname Kislev. Lilyana's middle name is Sergeyevna. Morgana's middle name is Georgevna, after her father, and both she and Lilyana go by the female patronymic surname, Kisleva.

Because the Kislevs live in the USA, they don't use their patronymics daily or in all interactions. You'll see them used in the story when a character wants to demonstrate deference or demand respect.