A black and white close-up portrait of a man with a full, dark beard and mustache. He has a serious, intense expression, looking slightly to the right of the camera. His hands are clasped together in front of his chest. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of his beard and the contours of his face.

NICOLAEVICH  
**BRATVA**  
BROTHERS

*The*  
**CLOSER**

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**K. C. CROWNE**

# THE CLOSER

A BILLIONAIRE BRATVA ROMANCE

K.C. CROWNE

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# CONTENTS

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Prologue

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](#)

[Epilogue I](#)

[Epilogue II](#)

[Scarred Prince \(Preview\)](#)

[About the Author](#)

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DESCRIPTION

**I never saw her coming...**

**She appeared in my world an enigma.**

**A lethal assassin who slips poison into the veins of her  
targets.**

**And a single mother with a softness beneath her armor.**

Now, she's trapped within my reach.

Stubbornly silent, she guards her secrets fiercely,

Her dual life is a puzzle I'm determined to solve.

**I will uncover the layers of this mysterious woman...**

**Whether through the intensity of my touch**

**Or the sternness of my command.**

*This is Roman Nicolaevich's story and a fully standalone romance. Enter the gripping realm of the Nicolaevich Bratva Brothers, where power and passion rule. In this Amazon Top 100 dark romance suspense series, four billionaire brothers dominate both their empire and the hearts of their women. The Nicolaevich and Antonov brothers share the same world.*

## PROLOGUE

“All I want,” he murmurs between kisses, “is to hear you ask. Like a good girl.”

My mind becomes a blur, every thought consumed by the pleasure he’s giving me - and withholding in equal measure.

The teasing becomes unbearable, the need for release is overwhelming.

“Please,” I whisper, my voice a desperate plea.

A satisfied hum emanates from his throat as his fingers resume their mastery.

He effortlessly lifts me, his touch gentle yet confident, as his hand expertly works its way up my dress and into my panties.

His fingers begin to work pure magic, as if they were playing an instrument with skill. The pleasure begins to build between my legs, becoming more and more unbearable.

With growing anticipation, he walks me into a tiny private room at the back of the jet with just an empty bed, shuts the door behind him and drops me onto the silk sheets, never once freeing his touch from my folds.

He pumps his hands, scissoring his fingers to stroke my walls and I moan in pleasure as he growls and proceeds to bury his face between my legs.

He works his tongue with skill as I steadily ascend my way over the edge of bliss.

I grip his hair gently, holding him against me, rubbing my slit against his tongue as he delicately savors my flesh with gentle, rhythmic motions.

“I could devour you, baby. You taste so fucking good.” He slips his fingers down and against my ass, pushing against the back entrance as he tongues the front.

The crescendo of sensations builds within me.

When the wave crashes, I shatter, gripping him tightly, my body convulsing with the intense pleasure he grants me.

The aftermath of my release has me in a state of euphoria, my breathing still heavy, my skin flushed. But as the sensations begin to wane, an insatiable hunger grows stronger.

I want more of him, all of him.

I wanted... no needed to feel his bulging cock inside; throbbing my channel and taking me to the edge of passion and beyond.

He stood, leaving me with my panties pushed to the side, and my dress hiked up over my hips.

“I need you inside of me, now,” I command, my voice firm, looking directly into his eyes.

He raises an eyebrow, clearly amused by my assertive tone. But the spark in his gaze tells me he finds my boldness incredibly alluring.

“Bossy, are we?” he teases, but the smirk on his face reveals just how much he enjoys it.

Without breaking eye contact, I raise myself up and begin to unbutton his shirt, revealing the hard planes of his chest, every muscle defined. He mimics my movements, his fingers deftly undoing the clasps of my dress.

A smirk plays on his lips as he takes in my body, his gaze intense and full of desire.

“Fuck, you are so damn beautiful.”

We continue our dance of undressing, each layer discarded heightening the tension between us. The world outside this

tiny room inside his jet fades away, leaving only the two of us and the electric charge that pulses between us.

He waits for me to strip off his pants, which I do with great pleasure.

I can't help but admire the sight before me.

This man is a work of fucking art—strong, defined, and irresistibly masculine.

My gaze flits down to his manhood, standing tall and proud.

It was the most beautiful sight I've laid my eyes on.

I am one fucking lucky girl.

# CHAPTER 1

“**Y**ou certainly have a way with entrances, my dear Roman.”

Under the vast, jeweled night sky of St. Petersburg, the spring air carries the scent of blossoming cherry trees, the chill of winter finally retreating. I, Roman Nicolaevich, step out of a sleek black Rolls-Royce, flanked by two resplendent women, Svetlana and Sasha, their dazzling gowns swaying with every calculated move. My bespoke, three-piece suit hugs my frame, a razor-sharp silhouette against the city lights.

The words came from Svetlana, one of my dates for the evening, delivered in a soft, sensual purr. I flash her a wolfish grin in response, a flicker of amusement dancing in my eyes.

“You play your cards right, gorgeous, and perhaps tonight you’ll see what else I have a way with.”

She moves against me in response, grinding her hip against my side for the briefest of moments as we make our way up the marble stairs. Sasha watches the two of us, her eyes betraying a calculation of her own, as if she’s wondering how to gain my favor.

Power plays upon power plays. Welcome to my life.

Tonight’s spectacle is a charity gala marking the inauguration of the newly minted Zephyr Art Museum, a colossal monument of gleaming glass and chrome not too far from the Winter Palace, emblematic of the city’s relentless march toward modernity. Laughter echoes from the marbled

entrance as the city's elite gather, their pearls and diamonds glimmering under the opulent chandeliers.

As we cross the sprawling, lavishly decorated hall, I feel the weight of curious gazes on me. I've made a name for myself in Moscow as a successful businessman, but in St. Petersburg, I'm a fresh face—an intriguing variable in the established equation.

Andrei and Sandra, my brother and sister-in-law, respectively, co-pakhans of the Antonov-Nicolaevich Bratva, have entrusted me with a mission. Our stronghold in Moscow isn't enough, and St. Petersburg is the next logical step in our expansion. I'm the chosen delegate, the Closer, as they call me, sent to pave the way for our family's venture.

Beyond the clinking glasses and the whispered conversations, a figure draws my attention. Mayor Sergei Yeltsin, an influential, rotund man with a reputation for being inscrutable and, dare I say, incorruptible.

But incorruptible hardly means immune to influence. Everyone wants something, even good little boys like the mayor. Gaining favor is a simple process, really, and can be summed up in three parts. First, you position yourself near them. Second, you find out what they want. Third, you give it to them.

Or, even better, you dangle the *possibility* of giving it to them. Either way is useful for having your target dance like a little puppet.

“Would you ladies excuse me for a moment?” I say, my eyes never leaving the mayor. They nod, coy smiles playing on their lips, fully aware of the game about to be played.

I thread my way through the crowd, taking a moment to appreciate the art on display. I've always had a taste for beauty, whether it be in women, art, or power. Tonight, I find myself admiring all three.

“Mayor Yeltsin.” I extend my hand, my charismatic smile practiced and disarming. He turns, raising an eyebrow before accepting my hand. His nearby bodyguards move in slowly,

ready to dismiss me should they have to. The mayor keeps them at a distance with a quick, sweeping gesture.

“Ah, you must be Roman Nicolaevich. I’ve heard interesting things about you,” he muses, his voice as deep as the Volga. “Charismatic, sarcastic, and quite the negotiator.”

“I’m flattered, Mayor,” I respond, the corners of my mouth tilting upward. My reputation precedes me, it seems.

“Not to mention,” he continues, “a somewhat unknown entity in our fair city.”

I grin broadly, warmly. “A mere entrepreneur – a serial one, you could say – ready to expand my operations. What better place than Russia’s crown jewel?”

“A serial entrepreneur... and a serial playboy, if my sources aren’t mistaken,” he adds, glancing over my shoulder at Svetlana and Sasha, the women sipping their champagne and chatting with one another while stealing coy glances in my direction.

His sources. No doubt the mayor has heard rumors of just who I am. However, I’m uniquely positioned in my family, the by-the-books face of our perfectly legal businesses. Therefore, there’s a bit of plausible deniability to me.

Then again, perhaps the good mayor isn’t so good, and his own mind is racing with calculations, figuring out how to get me close so he can crush me *and* my family. *Or*, judging by the way his hungry gaze lingers on Sasha and Svetlana, maybe I’ve already figured out what he wants, what truly motivates him.

“Guilty as charged,” I say, holding up my hands in mock admission. “What’s life without the company of beautiful women? Drab, colorless, boring.”

“That is true.” His eyes are still on my dates, the women matching his gaze with sensual smiles.

“Tell me, have you had a chance to appreciate this piece?” I gesture toward a particularly captivating portrait, using it as an opportunity to steer our conversation. “Or has something else caught your eye this evening?”

He snaps back into the moment, tearing his eyes from the women and latching them onto the piece. “It’s lovely, quite something.” He clears his throat, and I sense he realizes I’ve caught him in his vice.

“Perhaps, Mr. Mayor, I will leave you to make the rounds. Let’s reconvene later, yes? I think we have much to discuss about my arrival in your wonderful city.”

“I believe you may be right, Mr. Nicolaevich.”

With one more smile, I depart. I’m pleased with my performance – one step on the long path of putting the mayor right in my pocket. Such delicate matters can’t be rushed. They take time, patience, and work – like all good things in this life.

“Bored without me, ladies?” I ask as I approach Svetlana and Sasha.

Sasha gets right to the point. “Please don’t tell me you’re going to ask me to sleep with him. The thought of that pig of a man on top of me...”

I grin, placing my hands on the women’s shoulders. “Not my style, ladies. Though I wouldn’t be averse to you both doing a little recreational flirting with him this evening. Not to mention, I’ve found that denying a lech what he wants keeps him on the hook longer than simply giving it to him.”

“I’m happy to do it,” Svetlana says, her eyes alight. “Whatever you need of me, Roman.” There’s eagerness in her eyes, and I can see she means every word. “I’ll flirt, or... *please* him. Whatever you ask.”

“Suck up,” Sasha retorts, her words accompanied by a roll of her ice-blue eyes.

I chuckle as the women work out their own strategies to gain my favor.

“Enough, ladies. You’re both here for fun, to be admired. Perhaps enjoy that rather than clawing at one another, no?”

They sigh, sharing a look that suggests they’re ready to play nice – for now, at least.

I return to the task at hand, the women at my sides.

The art museum buzzes with the hum of soft conversations and the tinkling laughter of the city's elite. The spotlights hit the glistening champagne flutes just right, creating a dazzling spectacle. With a flute in my hand and a charming smile on my lips, I'm ready to delve into the world of intrigue and power play.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" I ask a city councilman, nodding toward a contemporary art piece. The abstract shapes and bold colors serve as nothing more than a backdrop to our conversation. His nod of agreement is my cue to delve deeper, discuss the museum's finances, its contributions to the city. With every exchange, I weave a thread of mutual understanding, of owed gratitude.

Schmoozing—it's an art. It isn't about the words that escape your lips but the impressions they leave behind. An honest compliment here, an amusing anecdote there, an offer of assistance when the time calls for it. The trick to being a successful Closer is to make sure everyone in the room owes you something. I'm not just selling a deal; I'm selling a persona—Roman Nicolaevich, the man you can rely on, the man you can come to when you need something. And, in time, the man you owe. The man who *will* collect.

As the night darkens, the gala morphs into a blur of faces and names, each one a stepping-stone on my path to control. The police commissioner, a stern woman with piercing gray eyes, falls for my well-timed humor. A powerful media mogul, draped in an expensive Armani suit, warms up to my shared affinity for classic literature. I'm not only making contacts; I'm earning their trust, their favor.

The beauty of this dance is in its subtlety. I play no games of overt power, no shows of force or dominance. Instead, I paint myself as an ally, an equal, a friend. And everyone trusts a friend, right?

"I must say, Roman, you do have a knack for these sorts of things," Mayor Yeltsin comments during another one of our conversations, his gaze shifting around the room as he notes

the growing number of influential figures in my orbit. “Personally, I’ve never been one for galas and balls and such. The true work of a mayor is done behind a desk.” He’s revealing himself to me – an excellent sign.

“Mayor, in my business, one has to be a people person,” I respond, matching his shrewd gaze. “After all, aren’t personal connections the real art we are here to appreciate?”

There’s a pause, then a hearty laugh from the mayor. “I suppose you’re right, Mr. Nicolaevich.”

In the end, it all boils down to control. Not the kind asserted with a gun or a threat, but the kind that thrives in the undercurrents of favors and alliances. As the Closer, my arsenal doesn’t contain weapons; it holds debts, promises, and, most importantly, trust.

Well, *sometimes* it contains weapons.

The conversation with Mayor Yeltsin goes on, taking a promising turn in regard to his willingness to consider a development project in the troubled Vasileostrovsky district, a part of the city that has proved notoriously elusive to many. As we clink our glasses in mutual understanding, my eyes rove across the dwindling crowd. They fall upon a sight that sends a jolt through my core—a woman, stunningly exquisite, standing alone by a grand, floor-to-ceiling window.

Her hair, a lush cascade of chocolate brown, falls over her shoulders, contrasting against the pale hue of her gown. Eyes, a deeper brown, sparkle in the room’s soft light, capturing the beauty of the night within their depth. A curvaceous silhouette is hugged by the flowing material of her dress, while her poise hints at an athletic strength.

I’ve known the company of countless women, their allure as varied as the city’s skyline. But this woman... she’s a masterpiece, a breathtaking fusion of elegance and strength. Her beauty is the kind that unsettles you, makes you forget your surroundings, forget yourself. Her brown eyes flick over to me for the briefest moment, as if instantly appraising me and finding me unworthy.

A warm sensation, unfamiliar and thrilling, radiates in my chest. I seemed to have been tamed by a single glance. Yet the realization lies dormant, obscured by the intrigue tugging me toward her.

“Mayor Yeltsin,” I say, barely able to tear my eyes away from the woman. “I just spotted an old friend from many years back. Forgive me for being rude, but I must excuse myself.”

“Of course, Roman,” he replies, using my first name, his tone warm, suggesting he’s already developing an affinity for me.

I smile. “Perhaps you can pass the time with my lovely companions, get to know them a little better?”

A lascivious grin forms on his face. Svetlana and Sasha respond with inviting smiles of their own. But the smile fades as the mayor seems to realize something.

“Nothing would please me more,” he says. “But... duty calls.” He gestures to the platform at the top of the room’s stairs, a perfect place to give a speech. “I have a few important matters to share with the attendees – mayor matters, you see.”

I smile. “Naturally. In that case, the four of us ought to reconvene later in the evening, maybe even discuss the Vasileostrovsky matter in greater detail.”

“Nothing would please me more,” Svetlana affirms.

The mayor’s eyes flick to the women, a barely restrained giddiness forming on his face, as if running a city were nothing compared to the chance to get to know my dates a bit better.

“That could be done, Roman. I will see you later, yes?”

“Most certainly.”

I leave my companions and make my way toward the woman. The sound of the soft violin swells, a perfect symphony for the approaching dance. I draw closer to her, the fascinating creature who has bewitched my senses. Her gaze is focused on the grand window, her silhouette framed against the brilliant city lights outside.

“St. Petersburg is quite beautiful, is it not?”

She turns her gaze to me, those dark, intoxicating eyes lingering on me for another moment before going back to the window. “Yes. I suppose.”

Alright. Not much of a conversationalist. That’s never deterred me before. Some women have thicker walls than others. All the same, it’s just a matter of chipping through. As I prepare to speak, the opening strains of Tchaikovsky flow from the band. I smile, recognizing the piece.

I clear my throat. “I can’t think of a greater tragedy than for a beautiful woman such as yourself to miss a dance to *Waltz of the Flowers*.”

“It’s a lovely song, yes.” There – that was something.

“May I have the pleasure of this dance?” I extend my hand, my voice as smooth as the aged whiskey I’ve been sipping.

Her eyes meet mine, a moment of hesitation flickering. It almost seems as if the gears in her head are turning, as if she’s weighing the pros and cons of taking me up on my offer.

“Yes. Fine.”

She takes my hand and the effect is beyond intoxicating. It’s taking much, much more effort than usual to keep my cool and maintain my unbothered facade. This woman... who is she?

As we walk to the dance floor, her fingers slightly trembling, I introduce myself. “Roman Nicolaevich.”

The color drains from her face at the mention of my name, her wide eyes reflecting a blend of surprise and... fear? Perhaps it’s the light, or perhaps it’s the reputation that accompanies my family name – though that would be unlikely in St. Petersburg.

“Something wrong?” I ask, unable to mask my concern completely.

“No... Nothing,” she stammers, regaining her composure, “I’ve heard a lot about you, Mr. Nicolaevich.”

“Only the good parts, I hope,” I chuckle, leading her into a gentle waltz, our bodies in sync, moving to the rhythm of the music.

Let the dance begin.

## CHAPTER 2

He places his hand on the curve of my hip. It takes all the restraint I have not to break it.

Wouldn't be the first time I'd done such a thing to a man.

"And you?" He's all confidence, smiles, and charm.

"Galina Ivanova." I give him a fake name, one common enough I hope it slips his memory.

My real name, however, echoes in my mind. Valentina Korochova, sister to the leader of a Chechen gang, and the Ghost of St. Petersburg's underground. Tonight, however, I'm simply a woman in a dress that costs more than most people's monthly salary, standing too close to a man I'd rather have at the other end of a silenced pistol.

"Roman Nicolaevich." His voice is like honey laced with shards of glass. His name, infamous amongst the murky world I inhabit, ignites a fire in my gut. Nicolaevich. The name has haunted my dreams and fueled my nightmares. The name of the man responsible for my fiance's disappearance. The name of the enemy.

The lights of the gala cast a dangerous halo around Roman, illuminating the confident smirk playing at the corner of his lips. He exudes a charm that's unmistakably infectious, a charisma that lures you in, blinds you to the menace behind the mask. But I'm no moth drawn to a flame – *I'm* the flame.

Roman Nicolaevich, physically, at least, is nothing short of a modern-day Cary Grant. He stands tall at well over six feet, exuding an air of easy confidence. His ink black hair is styled

with a touch of careless ease that only makes him look more handsome. His green eyes hold a devilish twinkle that makes my stomach churn – both with the bitterness of my past and the undeniable pull of his charm.

As we dance, I am hyper aware of his presence. His hand is warm on my back, his touch firm yet gentle. His old Hollywood smile is disarming, the kind of smile that has surely won over many women. But to me, that smile is a grim reminder of the man he represents, the family he's part of.

His attire is the epitome of dapper – a tailored, black, three-piece tuxedo that fits him perfectly, enhancing his broad shoulders and trim waist. The bow tie is a classic touch, adding to his overall charismatic persona.

Despite my resentment, I must admit, Roman Nicolaevich is a sight to behold, a dangerous mix of charm and power. He's an enigma, both fascinating and infuriating. But beneath his charming demeanor, I know he's a wolf in sheep's clothing, one who took the man I loved.

His hand slips lower on my waist, pulling me closer. There's a teasing glint in his eyes, a predator toying with its prey – or so he thinks.

"I must say, Galina, you dance like a dream," Roman murmurs, his voice barely rising over the elegant strains of Tchaikovsky.

"I've been told so," I respond coolly, maintaining a calculated distance.

"And you look breathtakingly beautiful tonight," he continues, his eyes drinking in my figure-hugging gown. "A sight that could make the stars jealous."

A hollow laugh escapes my lips. "That's a new one. Do you always spout such poetry to your dance partners?"

His grin widens. "Only to those who inspire it," he replies smoothly, not missing a beat.

Despite myself, I have to admire his silken charm. It's no wonder he's known as his bratva's Closer. He has a way with words that could make even a seasoned negotiator falter.

“And what if I told you,” I say, changing the topic, “I’m more than meets the eye?”

A shadow of intrigue passes over his face. “I’d say I look forward to discovering what lies beneath.”

The weight of his words hangs between us. If only he knew he was playing with fire.

“Careful, Roman,” I warn, a coy smile playing on my lips. “Some puzzles are better left unsolved.”

He chuckles, his grip tightening around my waist. “Where’s the fun in that, Galina? After all, the thrill of the chase makes the victory so sweet.”

As we glide across the marble floor, his hand firm on my waist, the world around us blurs. The swirl of colors, the laughter, the clinking glasses—everything dims compared to the harsh reality etched in my mind. It’s been five years since my world was torn apart, five years since the Antonov-Nicolaevich Bratva robbed me of my happiness. And here I am, dancing with the devil himself.

However, in our dance, *I’m* the one to be feared.

I’m known as the Ghost, not for any ethereal presence, but for my ability to dissolve into the shadows, to clean up the messes of our operation without leaving a trace. My kills are a thing of beauty, swift and silent, their precision speaking volumes of my unwavering commitment to our cause. Every life taken, every crime scene wiped clean, is a step toward avenging the man I loved, the man the Nicolaeviches took from me.

“Enjoying the dance, Ms. Ivanova?” Roman’s question pulls me back from my bitter reverie. His eyes, vibrant in the gleaming chandeliers’ light, hold an intensity difficult to ignore.

“Immensely, Mr. Nicolaevich,” I lie through my teeth. His grin broadens, oblivious of the storm his presence has stirred. Oh, how I’d love to wipe that smirk off his face.

The dance ends, but my mission doesn’t. Roman Nicolaevich has made a grand entry into my city, thinking he

can pull the strings, control the players. Little does he know the real game has just begun. He's dancing with the Ghost, and by the time he realizes it, it'll be too late.

I'm no stranger to the dance of death. Each step measured; each breath calculated. In my line of work, precision is paramount, and mistakes are fatal. Tonight, I've choreographed a new dance, not with Roman Nicolaevich, but with death itself. A dance far more intimate and lethal, performed not on the floor of a museum but in the confines of a champagne flute.

As we twirl, my attention shifts. Across the room, Mayor Yeltsin takes the podium, his glass of champagne already half-drunk, gleaming under the museum lights. The sight of the glass fills me with a dark satisfaction, knowing my plan is already underway.

I'd slipped a special ingredient into the mayor's drink earlier in the night, a poison, silent and swift, leaving no trace but a cold, lifeless body. The mayor had been inching closer to passing an anti-crime policy, a move that could severely hinder our operations. He painted a bullseye on his back, and tonight, I was the marksman.

My brother, Vladimir, had given the order. The mayor is a hurdle on our path to control St. Petersburg, and we need to remove him, just as we have removed countless others. A cold reality, but a necessary one in our world. The Chechen gang has always played a high-stakes game, and tonight was no exception.

The sound of applause pulls me out of my thoughts. Roman's grip on my waist tightens, his focus now on the mayor as well, oblivious to the ticking time bomb I'd placed in our midst. The room quiets, the music fading into a soft murmur as Mayor Yeltsin begins his address.

"Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed guests," he begins, "Thank you for joining me on this auspicious night, a celebration of art, culture, and most importantly, our beloved city. We stand here today, united against the forces seeking to pull us apart, to mar the famous beauty of St. Petersburg."

My eyes flick to Roman, who wears a thoughtful expression, his gaze locked on the mayor. “He talks a good talk,” I remark, looking back at the mayor.

He chuckles lightly, “Indeed, he does. A true politician.”

Mayor Yeltsin continues, his voice ringing with conviction. “We are on the precipice of a new era where crime and corruption have no place. An era where our city’s children can walk the streets safely, where our businesses can thrive without fear. We are on the verge of passing a policy that will tighten our grip on the illicit activities plaguing our city.”

There’s a round of applause, but I notice Roman’s lips twist into a half-smirk. “Sounds like he’s planning to make the lives of the criminal element rather difficult,” he quips, his gaze still on the mayor. His tone, while light, betrays a hint of seriousness.

I have to admire the ease with which the lie flows from his lips. Roman speaks about criminals as if he knows nothing of that world.

I watch the mayor as he coughs, his face gradually turning a concerning shade of red. An aide begins to move in, but the mayor waves her off. The cough passes, the mayor tapping his chest with his fist, the redness fading. It’s a subtle sign that my poison is working, and a wave of satisfaction washes over me. But my satisfaction is soon replaced with irritation when I realize Roman is hindering my exit plan.

I agreed to the dance with him to maintain my cover, not anticipating his tenacious charm would prove so inconvenient. The devilish twinkle in his green eyes and his disarming smile make him dangerously attractive. A part of me can’t help but respond to his charisma, despite my loathing.

Every word he speaks, every flirtatious glance he throws my way, only stokes my anger. His family is responsible for tearing my world apart, for the empty void where Iosef once stood. A flame of vengeance burns in my heart, not just for me, but for Iosef.

The mayor's speech ends on an optimistic note, but the applause is drowned by his persistent coughing, which has returned with a vengeance. Roman's hand slips from my waist, and I take this as my cue to make a clean exit.

I turn to him, forcing a smile. "I should really be going, Roman. It's been a pleasure."

His gaze turns to me, an unreadable expression in his eyes. "It's early yet, Galina," he says, his voice smooth as honey. "Allow me to accompany you to dinner."

My heart pounds against my ribs, and not in the way one might expect when asked out by a charming man. I need to leave now, but I can't risk raising suspicion.

"Roman, I—" I begin, trying to formulate an excuse, but he cuts me off.

"Please, Galina," he insists, a hint of sincerity in his tone. "Let me make your evening a bit more memorable."

I suppress a bitter laugh. If only he knew how memorable this night already is. I glance back at the podium where the mayor struggles to maintain his composure. The clock is ticking, and Roman Nicolaevich is an obstacle I hadn't accounted for.

"Is he alright?" a man near us asks, a tinge of concern in his voice.

Panic erupts in the grand hall as Mayor Yeltsin suddenly clutches his throat, gasping for air, his face as red as blood. His body convulses, his eyes wide with terror. A circle of horrified onlookers forms around him as he crumples to the floor. Screams echo off the museum walls, but above the chaos, I can hear the silent whisper of death.

I step back, using the crowd's distraction as my opportunity to slip away. I offer Roman one last fleeting glance over my shoulder before disappearing into the sea of panicked guests. As I leave the grand hall, my heart races, not from fear, but satisfaction. I've successfully orchestrated the mayor's last gala.

I reach my car and drive home, my mind replaying the evening's events. A part of me is relieved; the mayor was an obstacle to our operation, and he's no longer a threat. Another part of me knows this is only the beginning of a much larger, more personal battle.

Arriving home, I'm greeted by Lena, my four-year-old son Ilya's babysitter. She's been with us since Ilya was born, a constant pillar of support during my tumultuous journey of single motherhood.

"Ilya missed you, of course" Lena says, handing over my son. Ilya, with his wild, curly hair and the innocent gaze of his father, throws his arms around my neck, his warm hug soothing my frayed nerves. He was the result of a love story cut tragically short, the only part of Iosef I still have.

"I missed you, Mama," he says, confirming Lena's words. His voice is impossibly sweet as always, the most wonderful music to my ears.

I plant a kiss on Ilya's forehead, my heart aching at the sight of his father's eyes staring back at me. "I missed you too, my little bear," I say, cuddling him close.

Roman Nicolaevich might be unaware of it, but he's in my crosshairs. I won't rest until I avenge Iosef, until Ilya gets justice for his father. This isn't just about business anymore; it's about retribution.

Once Ilya is asleep, I step into my office, dialing Vladimir's number. The dimly lit room feels heavy with the weight of the conversation about to take place. The line rings once, twice, then Vladimir's gruff voice fills the room.

"Val," he answers, an unspoken question hanging between us.

"The mayor won't be a problem anymore," I say, my voice steady. I pause, then add, "And there's something else. Roman Nicolaevich was there tonight."

There's a heavy silence on the other end of the line, then a low sigh. "Valentina, what are you planning?"

I clench my jaw, my resolve hardening. “Justice,” I reply, the word echoing in the silent room. “For Iosef.”

Vladimir remains silent for a moment, then finally, he says, “Alright, Val. We’ll talk.”

As I end the call, the weight of the night’s events hits me. A dance has ended, but a war is only just beginning.

## CHAPTER 3

## ROMAN

A sharp tension cuts through the room as the faces of my brothers stare back at me from the screen. Their eyes, filled with a mix of concern and impatience, are laser-focused on me.

Andrei's voice, calm yet edged with severity, breaks the silence. "Roman, we need to know what happened. The mayor's dead, and the word on the street is it wasn't natural causes. You were there. What did you see?"

I lean back in my chair, the events of the evening replaying in my mind, but something else keeps tugging at my thoughts – the alluring Galina Ivanova. I shake the distraction away, refocusing on the task at hand.

"I saw nothing unusual, Andrei," I reply, my voice steady. "The mayor was fine when I last spoke with him. The coughing started during his speech... then got worse."

Leo's face tightens, his eyes narrowing, the milky gray of his ruined eye more intense than usual. "This is a mess, Roman. We can't afford any mistakes. If the police can link you to the scene of the crime, it could unravel everything."

"I'm well aware, Leo," I snap, irritation bubbling within me. "I've always managed things before. Trust me to handle this."

I think back to the gala, how I'd been stuck to the mayor like a barnacle on the side of a ship – a charming barnacle, but one all the same. No doubt more than a few guests of the evening noticed me.

Andrei raises a hand, silencing the brewing argument. “We trust you, Roman, but we need to be extra cautious now. You’re in St. Petersburg, not Moscow. We don’t have the same connections there.”

Damien, the “bastard,” chimes in, his voice tinged with frustration. “Find out who’s responsible for the mayor’s death. If it’s another family making a play, we need to know.”

Samuil, the most hotheaded of us, finally speaks up. “And be careful, Roman. If someone wanted the mayor out of the picture, they might have eyes on you too.”

The weight of their words settles over me, a reminder of the precarious predicament I’m engaged in. The stakes are high, and one wrong move could spell disaster.

“I’ll handle it,” I assure them, my voice filled with the confidence that’s earned me my reputation as the Closer. “I’ll find out who’s behind this, and I’ll make sure our interests in St. Petersburg are secure.”

There’s a pause, a silent acknowledgment of the trust and responsibility placed on my shoulders.

“Good,” Leo finally says, his voice firm. “Keep us updated.”

Andrei’s stern gaze bores into me through the screen. “Roman, you’ve always been able to navigate treacherous waters, but this is different. Something feels off. We need you to be extra vigilant.”

“I understand the stakes,” I reply, not allowing doubt to creep into my voice. “But the mayor’s death isn’t going to slow me down. I’m already making progress.”

“Oh?” Leo’s interest is piqued, his previous annoyance giving way to curiosity. “What sort of progress?”

A smirk forms on my lips. “I’ve arranged to meet with some local leaders at an exclusive underground poker game tonight. A handful of whales will be there, ready to be reeled in. It’s the perfect opportunity to schmooze and rub elbows.”

Damien raises an eyebrow. “A poker game? That’s your plan?”

I meet his skepticism with confidence. “It’s more than just a game, Damien. I’ll be playing with men who control vast resources, men who could become powerful allies. Many of the wealthiest and most influential men and women in the city will be there.”

Samuil nods thoughtfully. “It could work, but be careful, Roman. Poker is a game of deception, and you might not be the only one playing with hidden cards.”

I lean back, absorbing the wisdom in his words. “I know what I’m doing, Samuil. I’ve played this game before.”

“You’ve played in Moscow, not there,” Andrei interjects, his voice filled with brotherly concern. “St. Petersburg is a different beast, brother. The dynamics, the players, they’re all new.”

“I appreciate the warning, Andrei,” I respond, my voice tinged with a hint of defiance. “But I’m the Closer for a reason. I can handle this.”

The room falls into a heavy silence, each brother weighing my words, their trust in me battling against the uncertainty of the situation.

Finally, Leo speaks, his voice softened. “We know you can, Roman. We trust you. Just... tread carefully. We can’t afford any missteps.”

Andrei’s eyes meet mine, a silent agreement passing between us. “Keep us in the loop. If something’s afoot, we need to know.”

“I will,” I promise, feeling the gravity of the moment. “I’ll get to the bottom of this and establish our empire in the city while I’m at it. Nothing’s going to stop me.”

The call ends, leaving me to face the challenges ahead. My brothers’ warnings linger in my mind, a reminder of the delicate mission I’m about to undertake. But I’m ready.

I rise from my chair, the thrill of the chase quickening my pulse. The mayor's death, the mysterious Galina – they're all pieces of a puzzle I'm determined to solve.

The tension in my shoulders feels like a physical weight, but one I'm used to carrying. This world, this life, isn't for the faint of heart, and my temporary apartment reflects the balance of luxury and practicality.

Sleek, modern lines dominate the interior, from the unadorned steel and glass coffee table in the living room to the minimalist kitchen area with its high-tech appliances. The color scheme is neutral, dominated by shades of black, gray, and white. It's a place designed for efficiency and comfort but devoid of personal touches.

My footsteps echo softly on the polished concrete floor as I make my way to the bedroom. There's an elegance in the simplicity, a calculated modesty. The apartment is a far cry from ostentatious, purposefully so. In a world where appearances can be both weapons and weaknesses, it's essential to walk the line between affluence and discretion.

The bedroom is much the same, uncluttered and stylish, with a king-sized bed dressed in crisp, white linens taking center stage. Floor-to-ceiling windows offer a stunning view of the city, but heavy drapes are drawn, providing privacy.

But the true stunning view is the women in my bed.

The morning light filters through the curtains, casting a gentle glow on the bedroom. Svetlana and Sasha, the enchanting duo from the night before, still slumber, tangled in silk sheets. Their peaceful faces belie the turbulent world outside.

I stand at the window as I dress, my thoughts consumed by the tasks at hand. The mayor's death has changed the game, and I must adapt.

“Roman?” Svetlana's sleepy voice reaches me, filled with a promise of more warmth, more pleasure. But duty calls.

I turn, my smile genuine but tinged with regret. “Ladies, I'm afraid our time together must come to an end.”

Sasha pouts, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “So soon? You’re kicking us out?”

“It’s not as harsh as you make it sound. But I need to start my day. I have work to do, important work.”

They both sit up, disappointment in their eyes. But they know the score. They knew who I was when they agreed to accompany me to the gala.

I lean down, planting a soft kiss on each of their foreheads. “You were both divine, but I have an empire to build.” I grin as I speak, the mere mention of the task at hand enough to send a thrill through me.

Svetlana’s eyes narrow, curiosity piqued. “An empire?”

I wink, my lips curving into a playful grin. “A little empire of my own, here in St. Petersburg. Restaurants, nail salons, anything that will make me money.”

Sasha’s laughter fills the room. “You’re a funny man, Roman. A nail salon?”

“Never underestimate the power of a good manicure,” I reply, deadpan, raising my hands and giving them a mock inspection. They laugh in response.

With an affectionate farewell, I send them on their way, promising to call them again soon. But the truth is, my mind is already racing, plans forming, connections being made.

With an almost unlimited amount of cash at my disposal, the city is my playground. I need to rethink my strategy, to find a legitimate business to operate out of, a facade to hide the darker workings of the Bratva.

I grab my coat, stepping into the brisk St. Petersburg morning, a man on a mission. The city is filled with opportunities, ripe for the taking, and I intend to seize them all. The first step in setting up a stronghold, the cornerstone of an empire that will extend the Bratva’s reach and solidify our control.

The ding of a bell announces my entrance into the small, worn-out laundromat. Machines hum, churning clothing into

cleanliness, while the scents of detergent and fabric softener fill the air. A modest establishment, but one that holds potential for my purpose.

Behind the counter, an old man looks up, suspicion flickering in his eyes as they settle on me. I'm dressed a touch too fine for this part of town, my presence at odds with the familiar routine of his day.

"Can I help you?" he asks in Russian, his voice gravelly with age.

I flash my most charming smile, stepping forward. "Indeed, you can. My name is Roman Nicolaevich, and I'm interested in buying this establishment."

His eyes widen, then narrow again, mistrust replacing surprise. "Not for sale," he snaps, his tone final.

I don't waver, my confidence intact. "Everything has a price, my friend. Name yours."

He shakes his head, stubbornness etching lines deeper into his weathered face. "You don't understand. This place, this whole area, is under the protection of the Chechens. It's not possible to sell. You should leave if you know what's good for you."

My ears burn at the mention of the Chechens. The name has been whispering at the edges of my plans since I arrived in St. Petersburg, an obstacle I knew I would encounter, but not so soon.

I lean on the counter, meeting the old man's gaze, probing for more information. "Is that so? And who are these Chechens that they hold such sway over hard-working people like you?"

The old man's eyes dart away, fear creeping in. "It's just the way things are. I can't change it, and neither can you."

The challenge in his words stokes the fire in my belly. The Chechens may think they control this part of the city, but they've never dealt with a Nicolaevich before.

I stand, my tone still friendly but edged with determination. “Thank you for your time.”

As I leave the laundromat, the old man’s warning echoing in my ears, my mind races. The Chechens are more entrenched than I thought, their influence spread wide.

Treading lightly isn’t just a precaution; it’s a necessity.

I can feel the weight of the game shifting, the stakes rising. This isn’t just about buying businesses and laundering money. It’s a battle for control, a clash of wills.

I’ll have to be smart, strategic, using all my skills as the Closer to win this war.

I glance back at the laundromat, a symbol of the challenge ahead. The Chechens may think they hold the cards, but they’ve never played against me.

I’m Roman Nicolaevich, and I don’t back down.

The game is on, and I intend to win.

## CHAPTER 4

## VALENTINA

“Valentina,” my brother greets, his voice holding an edge of command. “Come in.”

Vladimir’s office is a fortified chamber, devoid of any unnecessary ornamentation. The man himself is a towering figure, broad-shouldered and built like a tank. His buzzed hair, chiseled jawline, and piercing blue eyes give him an air of authority and menace. He’s hard, unyielding, and his reputation as our leader precedes him. He commands respect and fear, but to me, he’s still my brother.

Vladimir is the embodiment of ruthlessness, a man sculpted by violence and power. His face is hard, marked with scars that speak of battles won, his body a terrain of muscle and sinew, always ready for the next fight.

Yet, when he looks up and our eyes meet, something in his expression softens. It’s a subtle change, a slight warmth that creeps into his otherwise icy gaze. In this world of darkness and danger, Vladimir’s only soft spot is his love for his family—his younger sister and his beloved nephew.

Vladimir’s love for family is his strength and his vulnerability. In a world where trust is a rare commodity, I know he trusts me implicitly, just as I trust him. It’s a bond forged in blood and loyalty, unbreakable and profound.

We hug, and I find him poring over a series of documents scattered across his massive, polished desk. His office smells of leather and cigar smoke, and there’s an edge to the atmosphere. The news of Roman’s arrival has caught our

attention, and Vladimir's scowl deepens as he processes the information.

"Roman Nicolaevich," he growls, his voice as rough as gravel. "The bastard is actually here."

His fingers tap impatiently on the keyboard as he pulls up more data. I lean against the door frame, studying the screen. The Nicolaevich Brothers Taxi Company is just the tip of the iceberg. Their web of control stretches far and wide, and their reputation in Moscow is fearsome. But Roman being here alone is an opportunity we can't ignore.

"What do you think he wants?" I ask, my voice steady and controlled.

Vladimir leans back in his chair, his muscles taut beneath his well-tailored suit. "Expansion, most likely. And he thinks he can waltz into our territory unopposed."

A bitter laugh escapes my lips. "He's in for a surprise."

Vladimir's gaze locks onto mine, and I see the same fire in his eyes that I feel in my heart. The Antonov-Nicolaevich Bratva has taken too much from us. They took Iosef, my fiancé, and left a wound that never healed. Now, they want to take our city.

"We need to act, Valentina," Vladimir says, his voice cold and calculating. "Roman is a threat. We take him out, we send a message."

I nod, my determination solidifying. "I'll take care of it. But I'll need time to plan, to find his weaknesses."

Vladimir agrees, his trust in my abilities unwavering. "In the meantime, we have another problem."

He hands me a dossier, and I skim through the details. One of the mayor's aides is still determined to push through the anti-crime policy that claimed the mayor's life. He'll be at a high-stakes poker game tonight. A perfect opportunity.

I meet Vladimir's eyes, accepting the challenge. "Consider it done."

He hands me an invitation to the game, a rare token granting me access to an exclusive circle of power and influence.

“Be careful, Val. Roman’s presence changes things. We don’t know what he’s planning.”

“I know,” I reply, a fierce resolve settling within me. “But he doesn’t know what I’m planning either.”

The night descends like a velvet cloak over the city, and I make my way to the game when it’s time to move, leaving my precious Ilya with a kiss and promise to return before too late.

The location of the poker game is a place that blends into the urban fabric of St. Petersburg, an old brick building with no sign, no name, and no indication of the high-stakes world concealed within. It’s a relic of the city’s industrial past, repurposed into a clandestine playground for the elite.

I step through a heavy iron door, nodding to the armed guards who recognize my invitation after I slip the token into one of their large, rough hands. The interior is a surprising contrast to the nondescript exterior, oozing luxury and decadence. Chandeliers hang from exposed wooden beams, casting a warm glow over polished wooden tables where men and women, dressed in their finest, engage in games of chance and skill.

My eyes scan the room, finally landing on my target, Dmitry Karpov, the late mayor’s aides who plans to push the anti-crime policy through. He’s seated at a table, engaged in a game, his face a mask of concentration. A sense of determination fills me; he’s the reason I’m here tonight. It appears the death of his boss wasn’t enough to dissuade him from a bit of fun. All the easier for me.

I carry a small vial concealed in the inner pocket of my jacket. The liquid inside is clear and unassuming, but it’s one of the most potent tools in my arsenal. The poison is a carefully crafted cocktail containing a high concentration of aconitine, a deadly substance found in certain plants like monkshood.

In small doses, aconitine can cause tingling and numbness. In the amount I have prepared, it's enough to disrupt the electrical signals in the heart, leading to arrhythmia, ventricular fibrillation, and ultimately cardiac arrest. The substance requires precision in handling and administration, and its effects can easily be mistaken for a natural heart attack.

This poison is different from the one I used on the mayor. That one was a targeted attack, exploiting his known severe allergy to histamine. The beauty of this poison is its subtlety, leaving little evidence behind and allowing me to slip away undetected. Most importantly, the death will happen later tonight. And what's more natural than a middle-aged man passing away during the night of a heart attack, his nightly glass of vodka close at hand?

I slip further into the room, my dress clinging to my curves, my demeanor poised and confident. My eyes scan the crowd, finding my target once more, Dmitry unaware of his impending fate. When he rises from his table and heads to the bar for another drink, I make my way in his direction, my movements graceful and deliberate.

As I approach the bar, my target is already savoring a fine glass of vodka. His attention to his drink provides the perfect opportunity, and I make my move.

"Pardon me," I say, feigning clumsiness as I brush against him. My fingers deftly slip the tiny vial from my pocket, and I pour the clear liquid into his glass. It blends seamlessly with the vodka.

Dmitry turns, his eyes widening for just a moment before breaking into a smile. "No harm done, Miss." He smiles, his eyes moving up and down my body in a way that makes my skin crawl. "Can I offer you a drink?"

I flick my eyes to his drink. "I'll take a vodka, too. Neat," I respond, allowing a playful smile to touch my lips. "It seems we have similar tastes."

He raises an eyebrow and leans closer. "Perhaps in more ways than one." His voice is a low purr, and his eyes linger on mine a moment too long.

I suppress a shiver of disgust, reminding myself of my purpose. “Perhaps,” I say, taking the glass handed to me by the bartender.

“To new acquaintances,” Dmitry toasts, clinking his glass against mine.

“To fleeting moments,” I reply, watching his eyes for any sign of recognition. There’s none, and I feel a thrill of satisfaction.

He takes a sip of his drink, savoring the taste. I watch with hidden pleasure as the poison starts its deadly work. “Until next time,” he says, winking at me before turning away. “And good luck tonight.”

I smile sweetly, knowing there will be no next time for Dmitry. He’s as good as dead.

As if to dampen my triumph of another job done, something catches my eye—a familiar face in a sea of strangers. Roman Nicolaevich. My breath catches, my pulse quickening. What the hell is he doing here?

The moment I spot Roman, a jolt of recognition and something more visceral hits me. Dressed in a perfectly tailored suit that highlights his broad shoulders and lean physique, he’s the epitome of sophistication and masculine allure. His black hair is styled to perfection, and his green eyes hold a twinkle of mischief that’s almost hypnotic.

But it’s the smile that really gets to me. When he flashes that Cary Grant grin, all charm and confidence, I feel my defenses crumble. It’s like a bolt of lightning straight to my core, and I’m so utterly turned-on I can hardly think straight, my pussy clenching, my panties growing wet. There’s a spark in his eye, a knowing look that says he’s aware of the effect he has, and he’s not afraid to use it.

I hate that my body reacts to his presence, despite the fury and the purpose driving me. But there’s no denying the allure of Roman Nicolaevich. He’s handsome in a way that’s almost infuriating, with a charm that’s as intoxicating as it is dangerous.

As he makes his way toward me, his smile playing on his lips, I know I'm not just up against an opponent in a game. I'm up against a man who knows how to play to win.

I steel myself, forcing my mind to focus, but the image of Roman in that sharp suit, looking sexy as fuck, lingers. I see him rise, his movements smooth and deliberate, his eyes never leaving mine. He's making his way toward me. Panic flares within me, but I push it down, my training taking over.

I can handle this. I can handle him.

Roman takes the seat across from me, his smile confident, his eyes dancing with challenge.

"Ms. Ivanova," he purrs, his voice like honey laced with venom. "Fancy seeing you here."

I force a smile, masking the disdain running through me. "Mr. Nicolaevich. It seems we move in the same circles."

His eyes narrow, a flicker of something dark in his gaze. "Indeed. Shall we play?" He sweeps his hand toward the poker table before us.

"We shall."

I ease into my seat, the rest of the guests making their way to tables of their own. I pick up my cards, my mind racing. Roman's presence has complicated things, but I can't let it distract me. I have a job to do.

As the night wears on and the cards are dealt and played, I can't shake the feeling Roman is watching me, studying me, searching for something. The game has taken on a new dimension, and I know I'm not just playing poker.

I'm playing a dangerous game with a man who has nothing to lose and everything to gain. A man who, like me, knows the stakes are higher than they appear.

A man who wants to win at all costs.

## CHAPTER 5

Something about Galina catches the eye and refuses to let go. Her brown hair cascades in soft waves, framing a face both fierce and delicate, her chocolate eyes holding a depth that's almost intoxicating.

But her body is what truly captivates me. She's curvaceous yet incredibly fit, her figure sculpted in a way that suggests both strength and sensuality. Every movement she makes is a dance, a subtle invitation to come closer, to touch, to explore.

The cut of her dress accentuates her curves, clinging to her form in a way that leaves little to the imagination. I find myself thinking very dirty thoughts, indeed. Thoughts of taking her, of bending her to my will and pleasuring her in ways she's never experienced.

I imagine the taste of her lips, the feel of her skin against mine, the sound of her moans as I drive her to the edge of ecstasy and beyond. The fantasies are vivid, the desire almost a physical ache that gnaws at my restraint.

It's unlike me to be so affected, so caught up in the allure of a woman I barely know. But Galina is a temptation I'm finding hard to resist. The way she carries herself, the glint in her eye, the confidence in her stride – everything about her calls to the primal, dominant part of me that wants to possess, to conquer, to savor.

What on earth is Galina doing at this high-stakes game of poker in a room filled with power brokers, criminals, and wealthy socialites?

*Who is she?*

I can't shake the memory of her at the gala, the way she danced, her intelligent eyes sparkling with defiance, the curve of her smile hinting at secrets. She looked the part of a rich heiress, but something in the way she held herself suggested more beneath the surface.

Watching her now, mingling with people who could buy or sell lives with a snap of their fingers, I can't help but feel intrigued. She doesn't look out of place, but she doesn't seem to belong here either. Her elegance is unforced, her confidence unshaken, yet she exudes a sense of danger that's both alluring and mysterious.

Could she have accidentally stumbled into this viper's nest, unaware of the true nature of the game? Perhaps she's merely here for the thrill, to rub elbows with those who play for keeps. It's plausible, but my gut tells me there's more to her story.

I am drawn to her, eager to peel back the layers and uncover who Galina truly is. The women I usually associate with are transparent, their intentions as clear as glass. Galina is different – an enigma wrapped in elegance, her very presence a challenge I can't ignore.

"Roman," one of my new acquaintances calls, momentarily breaking my focus. I nod, my mind still on Galina, who's stepped away from the table for a moment and is now engaged in conversation with a man I recognize as Dmitry, a known aide to the late mayor. He's flirting with her in an obvious, clumsy manner, and to my shock, she's smiling back as if his sloppy ploys were actually working.

A spark of jealousy ignites within me, irrational yet persistent. Why am I so fixated on this woman?

Shaking off my momentary distraction, I refocus on the game at hand. This is no place to let emotions get the best of me. I'm here for a purpose, to weave a web of influence and alliances that will further my goals in St. Petersburg. But Galina's presence is a siren's call, pulling me toward her, promising mysteries and pleasures that beckon me to explore.

I watch as she takes a sip of her drink, her eyes meeting mine across the room. In that instant, our connection is electric, a charge that travels down my spine, awakening a desire that's both thrilling and disconcerting.

I turn my attention back to the table, eyes fixed on Galina as she sits back down, taking her hand and examining it before confidently tossing her cards into the pot. She's good, very good, winning hand after hand with grace and poise. I find myself both drawn to her skill and challenged by it.

But I'm no novice at this game, and I decide to lose a few rounds on purpose, using the opportunity to study her. How she holds her cards, the way her eyes flicker, the subtle shift in her expression when she's bluffing or holding a winning hand.

As I observe her, I realize she's doing the same, those deep brown eyes studying me with an intensity that sends a thrill down my spine. The air between us crackles with tension, thick and heavy, laden with unspoken promises and provocations.

"You're losing on purpose," she finally comments, her voice as sharp as a blade, yet laced with a sultry undertone.

"Am I now?" I reply, leaning back and giving her a slow, deliberate smile. "Maybe I'm just enjoying the view."

She raises an eyebrow, her lips curving into a smirk that's equal parts challenge and invitation. "Careful, Mr. Nicolaevich. Confidence can be your downfall."

"Or it can be my greatest asset," I counter, meeting her gaze unflinchingly. "Besides, I like a good challenge."

Her eyes narrow, and I can almost see the wheels turning in her mind as she assesses me, sizing me up. "Challenges can be dangerous. You might lose more than you wager."

I lean closer, my voice dropping to a low, intimate timbre. "Or I could win something far more valuable."

We continue to play, our banter escalating, each hand a new battle in a war that's rapidly turning personal. The other players seem to fade into the background as Galina and I lock horns, neither willing to give an inch.

The stakes rise, and so does the tension, until it's just the two of us, our stacks of chips almost perfectly even, our eyes locked in a fierce duel as much about power and desire as it is about the game.

I can feel the heat of her, sense her determination, her drive to win. But I'm not about to back down, not when the prize is so enticing. She's a mystery I want to unravel.

"You play well," I admit, my voice dripping with admiration and something more that makes her eyes widen for just a split second.

"I could say the same about you," she replies, her voice cool and controlled, yet I can hear the underlying heat, the spark of interest she's trying so hard to hide.

"It's not about playing well." I lean in, our faces mere inches apart, our breath mingling. "It's about playing smart."

"And what's the smart play here?" she asks, her voice barely above a whisper, her eyes fixed on my lips.

I close the distance, my voice a soft growl in her ear. "That's for me to know, and you to find out."

The final hand is dealt, and as we play, I can feel the pull between us growing stronger, more insistent. It's a game within a game, a dance of desire and domination, and I know this is only the beginning.

I realize I'm not just playing for the pot anymore. It's her I want, Galina, with her sharp wit, her even sharper smile, and the way she looks at me like she's already got me figured out.

I'm ready to up the stakes. When it's just the two of us at the table, I make my move.

"How about we make this last hand more interesting?" I propose, leaning back and studying her face for any signs of hesitation.

She raises an eyebrow, intrigued but wary. "More interesting, how?"

"If I win," I say, pausing to let the words sink in, "you'll have dinner with me. Just the two of us. No games, no tricks,

just a nice meal and a chance to get to know each other better.”

“And if you lose?” she asks, her eyes narrowing as she considers the offer.

“I won’t bother you again. You’ll be free of my admittedly irresistible charm,” I reply with a grin, trying to keep the mood light even though my heart is -to my surprise- pounding in my chest.

She regards me for a long moment, her eyes searching mine, as if she’s trying to see if I’m serious. Finally, she leans forward, her lips curling into a slow, seductive smile.

“Deal.”

I feel a jolt of excitement mixed with a touch of trepidation. We both go all in, pushing our stacks of chips into the middle of the table. The air is thick with anticipation, and I can feel the other players’ eyes on us, but all I can focus on is her, the way she looks at me, the challenge in her eyes.

The cards are dealt, and we play our hands with the same intensity that’s marked our entire game. The room fades as we battle it out, each of us determined to win, yet both aware the real prize isn’t the money on the table.

When the final card is turned over, Galina’s face lights up, and my stomach drops as I realize she’s won with double aces.

“Well played, Mr. Nicolaevich,” she says, reaching forward to collect her money, her eyes dancing with triumph.

“You too,” I reply, forcing a smile even though I feel like I’ve lost more than just a hand of poker.

She hesitates for a moment, then, to my surprise, she scribbles something on a napkin and hands it to me. It’s her phone number.

“You can take me out to dinner anyway,” she says, her voice soft, her eyes warm. “You’ve earned it.”

I feel like a million bucks, like I’ve won the jackpot. The sting of losing the game fades as I realize I’ve won something far more enticing.

“Are you sure?” I ask, not wanting to press my luck.

“I’m sure,” she replies, her voice steady, her eyes locked on mine. “But don’t expect me to go easy on you. Dinner will be a whole new game.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” I reply.

“And one more thing,” she says. “My name’s not Galina – it’s Valentina.”

Before I can wrap my head around what she’s said, we part ways. As I watch her walk away, I feel like this is the beginning of something big, something that goes beyond a simple dinner date.

Galina – or Valentina—has challenged me, intrigued me, captivated me, and I can’t wait to see where this game takes us next.

## CHAPTER 6

VALENTINA

I tuck the hefty wad of cash into my purse, a satisfied smirk on my lips. Victory tastes sweet, but the thrill of besting Roman Nicolaevich adds an extra zing. No doubt a man as cocky as he isn't used to losing.

Killing him at dinner would be poetic, wouldn't it? Slip a little something into his food, watch him choke and sputter, then walk away, leaving him dead in some fancy restaurant, that cocky smirk replaced by a death mask of total shock, his head plopped into his soup.

I'm just about to make my exit, my mind whirring with plans and possibilities when Roman approaches me, his charming smile plastered on his face.

"Valentina," he says, his voice oozing confidence. "I know a great place nearby. We can go right now."

I blink, momentarily thrown off guard. My plans are still hazy, unformed, but his proximity sends a jolt through me, making my heart race in a way I don't entirely understand.

"Right now?" I stammer, cursing myself for sounding so unsure. I'm the Ghost; I don't get flustered. I don't lose control.

"Why not?" he shrugs, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "I'm hungry, and you owe me a meal."

"I won, remember?" I retort, finding my footing once more. "I don't owe you anything."

“You gave me your number,” he counters, leaning in close, his breath warm on my cheek. “That means you want to have dinner with me.”

I’m momentarily stunned by his audacity but also intrigued by the challenge he’s laid before me. My mind once more returns to the ultimate goal of his death. A steak knife to the heart might be crude, but it would be effective.

“I suppose you’re right,” I reply, offering him a tight-lipped smile. “But don’t think this means you’ll be getting any more than a meal.”

“I would never dream of it,” he replies, his voice dripping with playful sarcasm.

We make our way down the block in silence, and I find myself in mild shock from the spell this man seems to have cast on me.

The restaurant Roman has chosen is nearby, surrounded by boutiques and art galleries. Its facade is understated, almost hidden, but as we step inside, I’m struck by its effortless sophistication.

I reluctantly admit to myself that he has good taste. The restaurant is chic without trying too hard, appealing without being ostentatious. It strikes the perfect balance between luxury and comfort, and I can see why he would choose it.

As we’re escorted to our table, I wonder if Roman has a formula down pat for wooing dates. A specific strategy involving selecting the perfect restaurant, ordering the right wine, saying all the right things. It would be like him, I think, to have such a calculated approach to seduction.

But as much as I try to dismiss the setting, to ignore its charm, I find myself affected by it. The restaurant’s ambiance is working its magic on me, making me feel at ease, relaxed.

I shake the thought away, reminding myself I’m here for a purpose. Roman may have brought me here to wine and dine me, to get me into bed, but I’m here to end his life.

As we settle into our seats, I size him up, imagining the best way to strike, to kill him without raising suspicion. He’s

tall, strong, probably capable of defending himself, but I'm confident, skilled, and determined. Maybe he could hold his own in a fight, but a knife through the ribs and into the heart would be enough to bring down even the most seasoned killer.

"Is this your usual spot for impressing women?" I ask, raising an eyebrow at Roman. "I imagine you must have a well-rehearsed routine. I bet you've even got a nearby hotel where you're a regular."

He doesn't miss a beat, his eyes twinkling with mischief as he leans back in his chair. "Only for the ones I find exceptionally intriguing," he retorts with a playful grin. "And besides, it's not the place that impresses them, Valentina, it's the company."

I'm taken aback by his quick response, a surprised laugh escaping me. I find myself genuinely amused by his quip and his unflappable confidence. I expected arrogance, a rehearsed charm, but there's an authenticity to Roman that's disarming.

"I suppose I should feel flattered then," I respond, feeling a warmth in my cheeks that has nothing to do with the wine.

"You should," he says, his voice softer, his gaze intense. "I don't waste my time on just anyone." A thought occurs to him. "Valentina," he says, as if trying on the name for size. "And here I thought *Galina* was such a good fit for you."

I offer a wry smile in response. "Don't take it personally. I've dealt with enough overly insistent men in my time that I've found a fake name is the best way to fend off pests before they have a chance to become true problems."

"Well, here I am, your true name known." He smiles as if luxuriating in the implication. "I'll take this as a win."

I snort, doing my best to suppress a smile at his unrelenting charm and confidence. "Take it however you please, I suppose."

He orders wine, and we delve into a pleasant evening once it arrives, even as my mind races, plotting his demise. He might think he's won me over, but he has no idea who he's dealing with. He might have gotten me to dinner, but I'm the

one in control. And by the time the night is over, Roman Nicolaevich will be nothing but a painful memory.

The conversation flows as easily as the wine, and I find myself laughing at his jokes, caught in the magnetic pull of his charm. He has an easygoing manner, a wit that matches mine, and an ability to talk about anything from politics to pop culture.

Dinner with Roman is nothing like I expected. It's actually... enjoyable. And that's what terrifies me the most.

"I must ask, Valentina... How do you manage to always look so flawless?" Roman teases, a glint in his eye. "You look as if you've just stepped off the cover of a fashion magazine."

I roll my eyes but can't suppress a smile. "Oh, please, flattery will get you nowhere."

"Really? Not even a second date?" he counters, leaning closer, his voice dropping an octave.

I look into his green eyes, dangerously close to losing myself. "Maybe if you play your cards right," I shoot back, my heart rate increasing.

"You know, Valentina, I'm quite good with cards," he says, an intoxicating smile playing on his lips. "But I think I'm even better at reading people."

"Is that so?" I ask, feigning nonchalance. "If I remember correctly, I just beat you at that very game."

A surprised chuckle. "Touche." He pauses, studying me, searching. At first, I think he's running some bog-standard game. But the longer he looks, the more I begin to feel as if he truly sees something. "You're strong, confident, but there's something else there, something you're hiding."

My breath catches. How can he see through me so easily? Or maybe this is a well-used line. Either way, I deflect. "Perhaps you're the one hiding something, Mr. Nicolaevich."

His smile doesn't waver. "We all have our secrets, don't we?"

The evening wears on, and we continue our perry of words, the chemistry between us undeniable, full of innuendo and electricity. It's almost too easy to forget why I'm here, to lose myself in the moment.

The alcohol flows, and I feel myself becoming a little too tipsy, a little too reckless. We're so close now, our faces mere inches apart. Then, as I lift my wine glass to my lips, I catch sight of something over Roman's shoulder that makes my heart stop.

A man, standing at the bar, his profile turned slightly away from me, bears an uncanny resemblance to Iosef, my dead fiancé. The same strong jaw, the same dark, wavy hair, the same way he holds himself with a casual elegance.

My hand trembles, and I set the wine glass down, unable to tear my eyes away from the figure. It can't be him. It's impossible. But the resemblance is so striking, so hauntingly familiar, a lump forms in my throat and a cold sweat breaks out on my skin.

"Valentina?" Roman's voice breaks through my shock, concern etched on his face. "Are you alright?" He reaches forward and touches my hand, the sensation of his skin on mine snapping me back into the moment.

I force myself to look away from the ghost of my past, swallowing hard, fighting the sudden rush of memories and emotions threatening to overwhelm me. The pain, the loss, the longing – they all come flooding back in an instant, leaving me breathless and disoriented.

"I—I need to go," I stammer, standing abruptly, my chair scraping against the floor.

Roman is on his feet in an instant, reaching for my arm, his expression full of confusion and concern. I can't explain, can't articulate the rush of feelings that the mere glimpse of that man has stirred within me.

He follows, reaching out to steady me. "Valentina, what happened? Did I do something wrong?"

I shake my head, tears threatening to spill. “No, Roman, it’s not you. I just need to leave. Now.”

He looks at me, his eyes searching mine, but he doesn’t push. Instead, he helps me with my coat and escorts me to the door, his hand warm on the small of my back. His touch brings me surprising comfort.

The rain pours down, cold and miserable, as I step out onto the street. Roman is right behind me, his concern evident in his voice. “Valentina, please, talk to me. What happened in there?”

“No, Roman, it’s...” I trail off. How the hell can I explain what’s going on inside me? The rain mixes with my tears, but I refuse to break down now. “I just need to go.”

“But why?” He reaches out, gently grabbing my arm. “We were having such a good time, weren’t we? If there’s anything I can do to make it right, please tell me.”

His earnestness makes this so much harder. Why does he have to be so likable, so charming? Why can’t he be the monster I expected? I shake my head, pulling away.

“I’m sorry, Roman, I can’t explain. I just need to leave.”

He looks at me, his eyes filled with confusion – but also understanding. This is a man who knows the right time to push and the right time to relent.

“At least let me call you a cab. Neither of us should be driving.”

Before I can object, he’s on the phone arranging for a taxi. The car arrives quickly, the raindrops beating against its windows. The door opens, and I start to get in, but Roman’s hand on my arm stops me.

“Valentina,” he says, his voice gentle. “Will I see you again?”

I look into his eyes, so full of sincerity, and my resolve wavers. Why can’t I simply stay away from him? Why do I burn for his touch and crave the taste of his lips? I’m caught between desire and duty, my heart at war with my head.

“You have my number,” I finally say, my voice thick with emotion. “Call me.”

He smiles, relieved, and leans in. Our lips are mere inches apart, and I can feel his breath on my skin. But he stops short, and instead, his lips find my cheek in a chaste, tender kiss. It’s more intimate than I expected, more meaningful, and it leaves me aching for more.

“I’ll call you,” he promises, his voice husky, his eyes locked on mine. “Soon.”

“Good night, Roman,” I whisper, my voice barely audible over the sound of the rain.

“Good night, Valentina,” he replies, and I can hear the longing in his voice.

As the taxi pulls away, I watch Roman through the rear-view mirror, standing alone in the rain. I feel a profound sense of confusion and longing, my thoughts in turmoil. My mission, my vendetta against the Bratva, everything seems so much more complicated now. Roman has turned my world upside down, and I don’t know how to make sense of it.

The rain continues to fall, washing away my tears, but it can’t wash away the questions, the doubts, or the undeniable connection between us. I’ve never felt this way before, and it terrifies me. But as much as I want to run away from it, I know I can’t. Roman has gotten under my skin, and I can’t shake the feeling that my life will never be the same again.

I step into the warmth of my home, still dripping from the rain. Lena looks up from her book as I enter, concern taking hold as she sees the state I am in.

“Valentina, you’re soaked! Is everything all right?” she asks.

“I’m fine, Lena,” I respond, my voice sharper than I intend. I see her flinch, and I immediately regret my tone. “I’m sorry, it’s just been a long night. Thank you for staying so late with Ilya.”

“Of course,” she says, her voice gentle. “He’s asleep now, but he wanted me to tell you he loves you and can’t wait to see

you in the morning.”

I feel a pang in my chest, my heart aching at the reminder of the one person who matters most in my life. “Thank you,” I say softly, reaching for my purse to pay her. I include a bit extra from the evening’s winnings.

“You look like you could use some rest,” Lena comments as she takes the money, her eyes still filled with worry.

“I’ll be fine,” I assure her, forcing a smile. “Good night, Lena.”

“Good night.”

After seeing her out, I change into something dry before making my way to my son’s room. I peek in, finding him sound asleep, his little chest rising and falling with each breath. My darling boy, the center of my world, my little bear. I quietly step in, tucking the blankets around him and planting a soft kiss on his forehead.

“I love you,” I whisper, tears threatening to spill again.

As I leave his room, I feel a turmoil of emotions churning inside me. My mission, my vengeance, my unexpected connection with Roman, everything is tangled and confusing. I lean against the wall, taking deep breaths to steady myself.

What have I done? What am I doing? I’ve allowed Roman to get close, allowed myself to feel something for him. How can I reconcile that with the fact that he may be my enemy? How can I carry out my mission without losing myself in the process?

## CHAPTER 7

I'm in the heart of downtown St. Petersburg in the middle of a negotiation that's almost too easy. Standing at the entrance of this chic boutique, I meet the owner's skeptical eyes with a confident grin. My charm's always been a weapon, and I wield it effortlessly.

"The offer stands, Nadia," I say smoothly, my voice filled with charm. "You'll still have creative control, and with my backing, your designs could go global."

She nods, her eyes flicking back and forth between me and the lease, clearly torn. I can sense her hesitation, the doubt gnawing at her. I know I can push, apply pressure, and probably get her to sign right now, but that's not my style. I'm smooth, calculated. I play the long game.

"You know what, Nadia?" I say, leaning back, my tone casual, my eyes locked on hers. "I have some business in the neighborhood. Why don't you take some time to look over the lease? I want you to be sure it's fair. I'll be back in two hours, and if you have any questions, I'll answer them."

Her eyes widen slightly, surprised at my patience, my willingness to give her space. A slow smile spreads across her face, and I can see the tension in her shoulders ease.

"You're not what I expected, Mr. Nicolaevich," she admits, looking at me with newfound respect.

I flash her a charming grin that has won over countless business partners and beautiful women alike. "I aim to surprise. And please, call me Roman."

“Alright, Roman,” she says, the formality dropping as she extends her hand.

“I believe you’ll see the wisdom in this decision.”

“Yes... perhaps I shall.”

As I leave the boutique, I feel a sense of satisfaction. This is what I live for—the game, the chase, the thrill of the deal. I know how to read people, how to give them what they need while getting what I want.

More than that, she knows there’s no refusing a Bratva. The space I’m giving her is for me, to allow her time to rationalize her decision, to make it feel as if it’s her own. By the time I return, she’ll be more than eager to sign.

My phone buzzes in my pocket, but I ignore it for now. The world can wait. I have businesses to buy, an empire to build. Everything is going my way, just as it always does.

Except for one thing.

Valentina.

The memory of her haunts me, a lingering melody I can’t shake off. Those dark, piercing eyes, that sassy mouth, and a body that’s just... well, unforgettable. I’ve met plenty of women in my time, but none quite like her. She’s a mystery I can’t solve, and I want to unravel her, explore her secrets.

But I can’t let her distract me. I’m here for a reason, and it’s not to chase after a woman who left me standing in the rain. I’ve got bigger plans.

And yet, I find myself pulling out my phone, her number displayed on the screen.

*What am I doing?*

No, I tell myself, shaking my head. I’m in control here. But as my thumb hovers over the call button, I can’t help but wonder what it would be like to see her again.

What is an empire without a queen to rule it with? In the grand scheme of my plans, maybe Valentina is more than just

a distraction. Maybe she's the one thing I didn't know I needed.

I shake my head, still in disbelief that this woman has such a hold on me. I tuck my phone back into my pocket and turn my attention to the bustling streets ahead.

The streets of St. Petersburg are a symphony of history and modernity, a breathtaking dance of color and grandeur. The city stretches out before me like an intricate web, with ornate cathedrals reaching toward the sky, their golden domes glinting in the soft sunlight. The bridges arch over reflective canals, while the bustling streets come alive with the murmur of life, art, and music.

St. Petersburg has a charm all its own. There's a poetry to this city, a timeless elegance that draws you in and refuses to let go. Every building, every street corner, tells a story. From the grand Winter Palace, a testament to opulence and history, to the artistic treasures housed within the Hermitage, the city is a never-ending tapestry of culture.

I weave through the bustling Nevsky Prospekt, my footsteps echoing the rhythm of the city. Chic cafes line the streets, filled with the laughter of the locals, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee mixing with the scent of decadence and ambition.

But even amidst all this beauty, my mind drifts back to Valentina.

I can't remember the last time I was so taken with a woman. It's almost unnerving. I'm a master of desire and control. Women are like songs to me, beautiful in the moment, but quickly forgotten.

Valentina is different.

I thought we were hitting it off. The way her eyes sparkled, her lips curved into a teasing smile, the hint of a blush that gave her away. The flirty banter, the chemistry that was almost tangible. I was sure I had her.

Then something changed.

I replay the evening in my mind, searching for clues, something I might have missed. Was it something I said? Or was it the almost-kiss that spooked her? I wish things had gone differently. I wish I knew what went wrong.

Valentina has become an obsession. She's the only one on my mind, and I can't shake the feeling that I need to see her again.

For now, all I have are questions and a lingering sense of longing. The city unfolds around me, beautiful and inviting, but it's her face I see, her laughter I hear.

In the grand chessboard of my life, Valentina has become the queen. The one piece that's changed the game, and I can't wait to see what move she makes next.

As I step into the chic, bustling coffee shop, the scent of freshly ground beans and the hum of conversation fill the air. I've nearly signed the building's lease and doing so added yet another successful venture to my growing empire. The aroma of impending success is almost as intoxicating as the coffee itself. Almost.

My triumphant thoughts are interrupted by the sound of a child's cry, and instinctively, my ears perk up. It's a whimper that tugs at the heart, a lost, frightened sound resonating deep within me. I've always had a soft spot for kids; being an uncle does that to you.

I glance around, searching for the source of the crying, and find a little boy standing near the gelato section of the counter, tears streaming down his flushed cheeks. Dozens of people are there around us, and the sight of the child standing lost and alone among the indifferent crowd stirs something in me. He can't be more than five, his wide brown eyes filled with fear and confusion. My heart aches at the sight.

"Hey, buddy," I say, stepping over and crouching down to his level, "what's the matter?"

The boy snuffles, wiping his tears with the back of his hand. "I'm lost," he stammers, his voice breaking. "I saw the

ice cream, and I wanted some, and now I can't find my mama."

His words hit me like a punch to the gut, the raw pain in his eyes impossible to ignore. "Hey, it's going to be okay," I assure him, reaching out to ruffle his hair. "My name's Roman. What's yours?"

"Ilya," he replies, his voice shaky.

"Well, Ilya," I say, giving him a reassuring smile, "how about we find your mama together? Sound like a plan?"

He nods hesitantly, his eyes widening as I pick him up, tucking him securely into my arms. I make a silly face, pretending to be a detective on a mission, and he giggles, the sound like music to my ears.

"Now, Detective Ilya, we must search high and low, near and far, to find your missing mama. Are you ready for the adventure?"

He giggles again, the tears forgotten, as he nods eagerly. "Ready, Detective Roman!"

"Excellent!" I say, making my way through the café, Ilya's tiny hand gripping my shirt. "Now, let's see. If I were a missing mama, where would I be?"

We weave through the crowded café, Ilya's infectious laughter ringing in my ears as I make joke after joke, silly face after silly face. I can see the relief in his eyes, the trust slowly building, and I vow to myself I'll do whatever it takes to reunite him with his mother.

With Ilya securely perched on my hip, we make our way out onto the street, turning our shared adventure into a full-on expedition. We're a team, a duo of detectives on the hunt, and I can't help but enjoy every moment of it. There's something about this kid, something pure and genuine that makes me feel like a hero.

We check the surrounding block, Ilya's eyes wide with excitement as we search for any sign of his missing mother. But before we have to look too far, I hear a frantic voice shoot

up from the din of the crowd that sends a shockwave through me.

“Ilya? Ilya!”

I recognize the voice, a voice that haunts my dreams and fuels my desire. A voice I never expected to hear in this situation.

I turn, and there she is. The air is practically knocked from my lungs as I take her in. She’s dressed casually, her brown hair pulled back, her body encased in a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt. But even in the most ordinary of clothing, she’s nothing short of breathtaking.

Her eyes widen when she spots me holding her kid, and for a moment, we’re both frozen, the world around us fading as we lock eyes. Her expression is one of shock, disbelief, but also something else, something deeper that I can’t quite put my finger on.

“Roman?” she stammers, her voice trembling as she takes a step forward. “What are you doing here?”

“Mama!” Ilya’s excited cry snaps me out of my trance, and I set him down, watching as he runs into Valentina’s arms.

“Oh, my little bear!” She hugs him tightly, tears in her eyes as she looks up at me. “Thank you,” she whispers, her voice filled with gratitude.

“I, uh, found him in the café,” I manage to say, my usual cocky charm momentarily subdued by the intensity of the moment. “He was looking for ice cream.”

She smiles, a genuine, heartwarming smile that makes my heart do somersaults in my chest. “That sounds like my Ilya,” she says softly, ruffling his hair.

We stand there, our connection palpable, the air charged with a tension that’s both thrilling and terrifying.

Valentina’s eyes are filled with concern as she clutches Ilya close, explaining how she looked away for just a moment, and suddenly her little boy was gone. The panic in her voice is still evident, a mother’s worst fear coming to life.

“I can’t thank you enough, Roman,” she says, her words sincere and filled with a depth of gratitude that resonates within me. “You have no idea how terrified I was.”

I shrug, the grin returning to my face. “It’s what any decent man would do. Besides, I think Ilya and I make a great detective team.”

Her laugh is a melody I could listen to for the rest of my life. The connection between us, so potent and real, is only growing, and I can’t ignore the pull I feel toward her.

“How about some ice cream, Ilya?” I suggest, my eyes twinkling with mischief. “I think we’ve earned it.”

Ilya’s face lights up, his excitement infectious. “Ice cream! Yes, please!”

Valentina looks from her son’s eager face to mine, a soft smile playing on her lips. She seems to be waging an internal battle, but in the end, she just can’t bring herself to say no.

“Alright, ice cream it is,” she concedes, her eyes sparkling with a warmth that sends a pleasant jolt through me.

As we head back into the café, I notice how Valentina talks to her son in a language I’m vaguely familiar with but don’t quite recognize. Chechen, perhaps? I think nothing of it for now, caught up in the joy of the moment.

I watch them, mother and son, a picture of love and unity, and something stirs within me. A longing, a desire for something more profound, something that goes beyond mere attraction.

This isn’t just a game anymore, not a mere conquest or a fleeting passion. Valentina has touched something deep within me, something real and raw.

And whatever it is, it scares me.

## CHAPTER 8

I never imagined a scenario where Roman Nicolaevich, the man I'm almost certain is linked to the death of my fiancé, would be shouldering my child in such a tender manner.

The universe has a cruel sense of humor.

From the moment Ilya mentioned wanting ice cream to the moment he nestled himself, face deep in Roman's neck, laughter shared and stories exchanged, it felt like I was in some alternate reality. The air around them was charged with a gentle charisma I hadn't imagined Roman was capable of.

Seeing Ilya, my heart, my soul, my everything, with Roman is a dichotomy of feelings. On one hand, the protective mother in me is bristling. This man might be the very reason my son doesn't have a father, yet here he is, holding my son as if he means the world to him.

But then, there's that other, softer, more dangerous side of me—the side that melts seeing them together, the side that aches with yearning for a simpler life, for a partner, for someone who would treat Ilya with the gentleness Roman is displaying now.

As we walk down the streets of St. Petersburg, the chilly breeze sweeping by occasionally, I watch as Roman occasionally whispers something in Ilya's ear or adjusts the boy's head to a more comfortable position on his shoulder. My son's soft snores are the only sound competing with our soft footfalls.

“I haven’t seen Ilya sleep this peacefully in ages,” I muse, the confession surprising me.

Roman glances at me, a playful smirk playing on his lips. “Maybe he knows a natural when he sees one.”

It’s impossible to not roll my eyes, but a small chuckle escapes. “Don’t get too cocky, Roman. He also once fell asleep on a sack of potatoes once.”

His deep laugh, rich and genuine, echoes in the quiet afternoon. “I have definitely been compared to worse.”

The playful banter is a relief, a smokescreen for the emotional storm raging inside me. But even amidst that storm, one thing is clear—Roman has an undeniable charm.

As we approach my apartment building, I feel a new wave of uncertainty. Should I let this man, who holds so much power and mystery, know where I live? But looking at Ilya, so comfortably asleep, the thought of waking him up feels like a crime.

Roman seems to sense my hesitation. “If you’re uncomfortable, I can wait outside while you take Ilya in.”

“No, it’s okay,” I sigh. This is Roman, after all. If he wants to find out where I live, he probably already knows. “But just the hallway.”

He nods, understanding the boundary I set.

The elevator ride is silent, punctuated only by Ilya’s soft breathing. As we reach my floor, Roman gently passes Ilya to me, their brief moment of connection broken.

“Thank you, Roman,” I whisper, my voice quivering, the weight of the day hitting me.

His intense eyes lock onto mine, searching, always searching. “It was my pleasure, Valentina.”

I open the door and gently lay Ilya down on the couch, pulling a light throw blanket over him. Roman watches the movement from the doorway with a softness in his eyes that seems uncharacteristic for a man of his stature.

“He’s really taken to you,” I remark, a touch of wonder in my voice. Ilya doesn’t warm up so quickly to just anyone.

Roman shrugs modestly, the hint of a smile on his face. “Maybe it’s because of my family. I come from a big one. Always been around kids.”

My interest is piqued. “Oh?”

He leans against the doorway, arms folded. “Three older brothers, and one younger half-brother. And with brothers come sisters-in-law and their children. It’s a full house during holidays.”

I chuckle softly. “Sounds chaotic. But also warm.”

“It is,” Roman replies, a nostalgic glint in his eye. “I’m quite popular with my nieces and nephews.”

“I can see why,” I comment. The ambiance shifts subtly, growing a tad more intimate as we venture into personal territory.

“What about you?” Roman asks, gently probing. “You mentioned an older brother?”

I hesitate before speaking. “Yes, an older brother. We aren’t as close as we used to be, but family is family.”

Roman nods understandingly. There’s a lull, a beat of silence, before he speaks again. “And Ilya’s father? Is he around?”

The question feels like a punch in the gut. I feel my face grow cold, my jaw set rigid. I briefly close my eyes, taking a deep breath. “No, he isn’t.” My voice is barely above a whisper.

I feel Roman’s gaze on me, full of questions he’s not asking. My defensive walls are up, but he doesn’t push, doesn’t try to scale them.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay,” I interrupt, putting on a brave face. “Life throws curve balls. You learn to handle them.”

We stand in the doorway in silence, the weight of the unspoken words pressing down on both of us. The atmosphere is thick with an odd blend of understanding and curiosity.

“Thank you for today, Roman,” I begin, trying to change the subject. “For the ice cream, for Ilya, for everything.”

He gives a small smile, the tension in the room dissipating slightly. We lock eyes, and in that moment, amid the uncertainty and the past shadows, there’s a promise of something more, something undefined but undeniably present.

The space between us feels charged, every inch thrumming with a palpable tension. His dark eyes are fixated on mine, a depth in them I hadn’t seen before. His chest heaves slightly, and I feel the warmth radiating from him.

We stand inches apart, feeling the undeniable magnetism, pulling, urging, demanding. And then, as if it’s the most natural thing in the world, he takes a half step into my apartment, bridging the gap.

His lips find mine, and everything around us fades into obscurity. The kiss is raw, full of unbridled passion. There’s an urgency in the way he grips my waist, pulling me closer. It’s as if we’re trying to consume each other, desperate to quench a thirst we didn’t even know existed.

My fingers tangle in his hair, pressing him deeper into the kiss. Every nerve ending is on fire, every sense heightened. The sensation is intoxicating, the need overwhelming.

We break apart for a brief second, gasping for breath, before crashing into each other again. The world, with all its complications, fades to a distant hum. All that matters is the feel of his lips on mine, the heat of his body pressed against me.

And then, the shrill ring of my phone slices through the air, jarring us back to reality. With great reluctance, I pull back, my heart pounding, eyes wide. Roman mirrors my expression, a mixture of surprise and desire.

I reach for the phone on the table and see my brother’s name flash on the screen. Taking a deep breath, I answer,

trying to mask the shakiness in my voice.

“Valentina?” My brother’s voice is filled with concern.

“Yes, I’m here. What is it?”

There’s a pause. “Are you in the middle of something?” Vladimir asks.

I glance at Roman. *Why yes, I most certainly am.* “Just putting Ilya down. Let me call you back in a few minutes.”

Another pause. “Fine. But don’t keep me waiting too long. And tell the little man his uncle says hello.” Something in his tone suggests he doesn’t quite believe me. Or, perhaps, I’m just being paranoid.

“I will. Talk soon.”

The call ends and Roman clears his throat, the sound dragging my attention back to him. He looks equally flustered, ruffling his hair and glancing toward the door.

“I should go,” he speaks, though his voice holds a hint of regret.

I nod, my heart still racing. “Thank you again, Roman, for everything.”

He leans in, pressing a chaste kiss to my forehead. “Anytime, Valentina,” he whispers, his breath tickling my ear.

Roman pauses at the door, his silhouette framed by the dim hallway light. He glances back at me, a hint of vulnerability peeking through that otherwise confident veneer. “Can I see you again?”

I’m torn; this is the man I believe to be responsible, or at the very least involved, in my fiancé’s death, yet the very same man who’s shown kindness to my son and has given me a kiss has rocked my world. It feels like two sides of a coin, a duality that shouldn’t coexist but somehow does.

“One more time,” he adds, a playful smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. “One more chance to take you out.” His eyes twinkle mischievously, and I can tell he’s enjoying the double entendre.

I look at him, trying to decipher the mystery that is Roman. A part of me screams caution, but another part is tempted. The allure of him is intoxicating, and I find it hard to resist. But the mission, the reason I have stepped into his world, comes flooding back.

“Why?” I ask, genuinely curious. “Why do you want to see me again?”

He takes a moment before answering, his gaze sincere. “There’s something about you, Valentina. There’s a depth, a fire I haven’t seen in a long time. I want to know you, truly know you.”

I let out a soft laugh. “You make it sound like we’re in some epic romance.”

Roman steps closer, and for a second, I think he might kiss me again. “Who’s to say we’re not?”

The room is filled with an electric tension. I take a deep breath, attempting to rein in the whirlwind of emotions inside me.

“Alright,” I begin slowly, “one more date.”

His face lights up with a victorious smile. “Would I be able to pick you up Friday after lunch?”

“That’s a little early for a date?” I ask, curious.

“I’m full of surprises,” he hints with a mischievous smile. “So Friday afternoon?”

I nod, trying to look nonchalant, but internally, my mind races. This is an opportunity, a way to get Roman alone and vulnerable. And when that moment comes, I’ll be ready to strike. As much as I feel conflicted, I remind myself that I have to stay true to my mission.

“Yes, Friday is fine,” I finally respond, my voice betraying none of the inner turmoil I feel.

Roman’s grin widens. “Perfect. Until then, Valentina.”

And with that, he’s gone, leaving me standing in the doorway, a myriad of feelings churning inside. I close the door

and lean against it, exhaling deeply. Friday feels like a ticking time bomb, and I'm not sure which way it will explode.

## CHAPTER 9

The day's light pours through the luxurious curtains of my apartment, heralding what promises to be an unforgettable evening. I should be neck-deep in work, overseeing the acquisition of the new business or handling the strings of investments that diversify my portfolio. But today, there's only one thing—or rather, one person—on my mind: Valentina.

When was the last time a woman made me feel this way? The electric charge between us... the tension is enough to short-circuit the city's power grid. I'm a man used to getting what I want—whether in business or pleasure. Valentina, however, presents a challenge. A delightful, exhilarating challenge.

Pulling out my phone, I decide to give her a hint of what's in store for tonight. As the dial tone hums in my ear, I can't help but feel a thrill of anticipation.

“Hello?” Her voice is as sultry as ever, even if it's tinged with a hint of surprise.

“Valentina,” I greet, my voice deliberately smooth and steady. “Do you like Italian?”

A slight pause. “Italian food? I adore it. Why?”

“That's all I needed to know.” I grin, even though she can't see it. “And as for why? —where would the fun be if I gave everything away now?”

There's a playful sigh on the other end. “You're always so full of surprises, aren't you?”

“Get ready for a night you won’t forget.”

As we hang up, I chuckle to myself. She has no idea what she’s in for.

I speed dial Katarina, my assistant in Moscow, needing to set the wheels in motion. “Book the jet. We’re going to Rome.”

The slight hesitation in her voice is predictable. “Tonight, sir? That’s... ambitious.”

“That’s how I operate,” I reply with confidence. “Can it be done?”

After a brief pause, she confirms, “Of course, sir. Everything will be ready.”

“Perfect.”

I already have in mind a quaint, romantic restaurant I’d stumbled upon during one of my trips to the Italian capital—a hidden gem overlooking the Colosseum. The ambiance, the food, the history—all of it would provide the perfect backdrop for the evening I’m envisioning.

Ensuring my look is perfect, I pick out the deep navy suit with a subtle pattern. It’s classy, understated, but speaks volumes about the man wearing it. A glance at my watch tells me it’s almost time. Everything is in place.

The hours that follow are a whirlwind of activity. The jet is prepared, reservations made, and every minute detail is checked and rechecked. I don’t usually get nervous, but this isn’t just any date. With Valentina, the stakes feel higher, more personal.

As my car pulls up outside Valentina’s place a little after noon, my heart kicks up a notch. Not from nerves, but anticipation. I’m eager to see her again, to spend more uninterrupted time with her. But nothing could have prepared me for the sight that greets me when she opens her front door.

The subtle golden hue of the sun illuminates her, casting her in an almost ethereal glow. She’s wearing a dress the color of midnight, hugging her curves in all the right places and

leaving just enough to the imagination. It stops mid-thigh, showing off legs that seem to go on forever, accentuated by a pair of sky-high heels.

Her hair cascades down her back in glossy waves, and her eyes shimmer with a mix of excitement and mischief. There's a playfulness to her tonight, evident in the way her dress sways slightly as she moves, how her lips curve into that tantalizing smile I've come to crave.

God, she's a vision.

A very tangible heat begins to spread within me, a primal response to the sight of her. The kind of heat that reminds a man of basic, raw instincts. For a split second, I feel like a wild animal, caged and restless, yearning to claim what's in front of him. I've seen many beautiful women in my life, been with many, but none have evoked such a visceral reaction.

I step out of the car, unable to tear my eyes away. "You look breathtaking," I manage to get out, though the words feel grossly inadequate for the surge of desire flooding through me.

She smirks, that dangerous sparkle still in her eyes. "You clean up pretty nice yourself."

I start the car, maneuvering smoothly through the streets. I notice her trying to figure out our destination, looking left and right, clearly unfamiliar with this part of the city.

"So," she says, breaking the silence, "where are we off to?"

I can't resist a tease. "Somewhere with Italian food."

She rolls her eyes, playfully sarcastic. "Very helpful."

Chuckling, I ask, "Would you prefer a hint?"

She nods, anticipation evident in her eyes. "Definitely."

Leaning closer, I let her catch the scent of my cologne. "Think romance. Think... timeless."

She smirks, clearly entertained. "That could be anywhere."

"That's the point," I reply with a grin.

She laughs, the sound warm and genuine. “You’re really going to make me work for it, aren’t you?”

I wink at her, unable to help myself. “Every good thing is worth waiting for, Valentina.”

Watching her as we drive, I can tell she’s excited. And, truth be told, so am I. Tonight promises to be unforgettable.

It isn’t long at all before we arrive at the airport, and the moment Valentina’s gaze lands on the sleek, gleaming jet—its silhouette cutting a formidable figure against the rapidly darkening sky—her eyes widen in astonishment.

“You can’t be serious,” she breathes, an incredulous smile playing at the corners of her lips. “What is this?”

I sidle up next to her, offering a sly grin. “Remember when you said I was full of surprises? Tonight, I’m taking you to Rome. When I asked if you were in the mood for Italian, I meant it.”

She chuckles, shaking her head. “This is beyond anything I could have imagined. You’re really a romantic deep down, aren’t you?”

I lean in, my lips brushing against her ear. “Only for the right woman.”

Stepping onto the jet, Valentina looks around with barely concealed awe. The interior is an ode to luxury: plush cream-colored leather seats, mahogany wood accents, and ambient lighting that casts a soft, golden hue over everything. There’s a bar stocked with the finest champagnes and spirits, and soft jazz melodies filter through the state-of-the-art sound system.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispers, tracing a finger along the smooth surface of a leather armrest.

I nod in appreciation. “The best for tonight.”

However, a note of concern soon enters her voice. “Roman, I hope you don’t have a weekend getaway planned. I can’t be away from Ilya for too long.”

I smile reassuringly. “Don’t worry. Dinner in Rome, a night under the stars, and we’ll be back by morning.”

Her relief is palpable. “Good,” she says, slipping out her phone and sending a quick text to her sitter, most likely, letting her know about the change in plans.

“Your sitter won’t mind the overnight?”

“No.”

The simple answer is curious, but I don’t comment. Her sitter is her business.

After ensuring her comfort, she casts a curious glance my way. “How do you afford all this? It’s beyond extravagant.”

I pause, considering my answer. While the truth of my operations isn’t something I’m ready to share, I’ve prepared a cover story for such inquiries.

“Well, the taxi business has been good to me,” I begin, “but I’ve been branching out. Real estate development, mainly. There’s a lot of money to be made in acquiring old properties, revitalizing them, and turning them into luxury accommodations.”

She raises an eyebrow. “So you’re not just a taxi mogul?”

“There’s more to me than meets the eye, Valentina. Always.”

The evening stretches before us, filled with endless possibilities. And as the jet’s engines roar to life, I’m more certain than ever I’ll do whatever it takes to win this woman’s heart.

The three-hour flight goes by with incredible speed, Valentina and I sharing a bit of wine as we talk, her telling me story after story of Ilya, and me matching her with amusing tales of my nieces and nephews. There’s an ease, a comfort to our conversation I wasn’t quite prepared for.

It’s not long at all before Rome unfolds beneath us. The excitement is palpable. We disembark from the plane, the breeze carrying a mixture of history, passion, and a promise of adventure. Valentina’s wonderment shines brightly; the cityscape reflected in her widened eyes.

The Trevi Fountain is our first destination. Water cascades rhythmically while tourists and locals alike are engrossed in the age-old tradition. Valentina laughs, the sound echoing like a chime as she gracefully tosses a coin over her left shoulder with her right hand. I mimic her, silently hoping the legend of a return to Rome might also mean a return with her. Later, we indulge ourselves at a nearby gelateria. The taste of stracciatella on her lips and pistachio on mine becomes an inside joke between us as we share playful jabs and stolen tastes.

Hand in hand, we meander through the ancient streets of Rome. The colossal structure of the Pantheon evokes awe, its massive columns shadowing us. Our journey leads us to the Colosseum, its grandeur painting pictures of gladiators and roaring crowds. Valentina leans against its stones, lost in thought. I snap a photograph, capturing her silhouette against the backdrop of time.

Evening finds us in Trastevere. A small, candlelit restaurant welcomes us with the aroma of authentic Italian cuisine. Twinkling lights from above and the soulful tunes of a distant accordion wrap around us, creating an atmosphere of romance. Plates of spaghetti carbonara and osso buco are our choice for the night, each bite an explosion of flavor, each sip of wine a journey to vineyards.

A nearby jazz club becomes our refuge as the night deepens. The notes from a saxophone create an invisible thread pulling us closer on the dance floor. As the world outside fades, our dance becomes a silent conversation, telling tales of desire and longing.

Before the night ends, we find solitude on a rooftop. The vast expanse of the city lies below us, a sea of lights against the dark canvas. Conversation flows, and in the midst of shared stories and hushed tones, our faces inch closer, the promise of a kiss lingering in the air.

However, Rome, with all its allure, soon becomes a memory as we head back to the jet. As the city bids us farewell, the weight of the night rests between us.

As the jet soars through the night sky, the world below seems distant, removed, and insignificant. We're left in a bubble, a momentary world created just for us, where only our heartbeats and the thrum of the plane's engines break the silence. The plush leather of the jet's interior reflects the ambient light, casting soft glows over Valentina's face. Those eyes, ones I'd gotten lost in over the beautiful streets of Rome, now pierce through me with an intensity impossible to resist.

As I pour us some wine, she moves closer. Our glasses clink, and I'm taken aback by her forwardness when she gently sets hers down and slides onto my lap. The sensation of her body pressed against mine sends a jolt through me. Her fingers trace patterns on the nape of my neck, and I tilt her chin up to meet her gaze. The air between us is electric, charged with unspoken desires.

Our lips meet, and everything else fades away. The softness of her lips, the gentle tug she gives my lower one, the way her fingers move to the back of my head—pulling me in deeper—it's all intoxicating.

Amid our heated exchange, I can't help but tease her, "Ever joined the mile-high club?"

She pulls back just a little, her eyes wide with feigned innocence, and then a sly grin appears. "No," she whispers, her breath warm against my face, "But they do say there's a first time for everything."

## CHAPTER 10

VALENTINA

“Did you plan this when you invited me to Rome?” I ask, my voice a sultry whisper.

His eyes gleam with mischief.

I can feel him, pressing insistently against me, and heat rushes to my core. My breath catches when his fingers trail to my inner thigh.

His touch is maddening, driving me wild, and I can't find the willpower to stop him.

“I'd be lying if I said it wasn't on my list of possibilities.”

The moment Roman's lips find mine, a spark ignites within me.

I've shared kisses before, but none have ever set my soul alight like this.

The lingering taste of our earlier wine merges with his intoxicating essence, and I find myself eagerly chasing after every hint of flavor.

His fingers dance over my waist, each touch sending shivers down my spine. Drawing me closer, the rest of the world fades away, leaving just us and the soft hum of the jet's engines.

Everything feels heightened, more intense.

I grind against him, causing a low growl to escape him.

Fuck, I'm addicted to that sound.

I'm addicted to this man who is every bit wrong for me.

He teases the fabric of my dress, causing me to gasp and tilt my head to give him better access. Every logical part of me screams to pull away, to slow down, but as his touch ventures further, I only crave more.

“Do you want this?” His voice, a seductive murmur against my neck, sends tingles throughout my body.

I pause, wrestling with my thoughts. I know we're moving fast, that I should have my guard up. Yet as he continues to explore, all I can think of is how much I yearn for more.

“Yes,” I reply, the word sounding more like a surrender than an affirmation.

Our lips reunite, the kiss growing hungrier, more desperate. There's an unspoken yearning, a tangible desire surrounding us.

Right and wrong blend together, and in this sizzling moment, I give in to the overpowering attraction I feel for him.

His fingers, with tantalizing precision, push aside the thin fabric of my panties.

My body responds instantly, my mind swimming in a haze of need and desire. His touch on me is electric, causing shockwaves of pleasure that make my head spin.

It's a slow build, one that has me arching into his touch, chasing the impending climax.

However, just as I think I'm about to find release, his fingers retreat.

The sudden lack of contact has me gasping, my eyes opening to find his devilishly smug grin.

“Roman,” I whisper, my voice husky with want. But instead of giving me what I'm so desperately craving, he continues to tease me, his fingers dancing tantalizingly close but never providing the direct contact I yearn for.

His lips brush against my ear. “Ask politely, Valentina,” he murmurs, his voice dripping with sultry playfulness.

I bite back a moan, pride and arousal warring within me.

My stubbornness wants to resist, to refuse to give him the satisfaction of hearing me beg. Yet the other side of me, the one that's on fire and aching for release, is quickly gaining ground.

"You think you can tell me what to do?" I retort, feigning defiance even as I squirm against him, trying to find some friction, some sweet relief. But Roman remains unfazed, his fingers continuing their maddening dance, bringing me to the edge only to pull back again.

His lips find my neck, pressing a trail of heated kisses that only adds to my delirium.

"All I want," he murmurs between kisses, "is to hear you ask. Like a good girl."

My mind becomes a blur, every thought consumed by the pleasure he's giving and withholding in equal measure.

The teasing becomes unbearable, the need for release overwhelming.

The dam of my pride finally breaks.

"Please, Roman," I whisper, my voice a desperate plea. "Please."

A satisfied hum emanates from his throat as his fingers resume their mastery.

He effortlessly lifts me, his touch gentle yet confident, as his hand expertly works its way up my dress and into my panties.

His fingers begin to work pure magic, as if they were playing an instrument with skill. The pleasure begins to build between my legs, becoming more and more unbearable.

With growing anticipation, he walks me into a tiny private room with just an empty bed, shuts the door behind him and drops me onto the silk sheets, never once freeing his touch from my folds.

He pumps his hands, scissoring his fingers to stroke my walls and I moan in pleasure as he growls and proceeds to bury his face between my legs.

He works his tongue with skill as I steadily ascend my way over the edge of bliss.

I grip his hair gently, holding him against me, rubbing my slit against his tongue as he delicately savors my flesh with gentle, rhythmic motions.

“I could devour you, baby. You taste so fucking good.” He slips his fingers down and against my ass, pushing against the back entrance as he tongues the front.

The crescendo of sensations build within me.

When the wave crashes, I shatter, gripping him tightly, my body convulsing with the intense pleasure he grants me.

The aftermath of my release has me in a state of euphoria, my breathing still heavy, my skin flushed. But as the sensations begin to wane, an insatiable hunger grows stronger.

I want more of Roman, all of him.

Fuck! I want him in a way I haven't wanted a man in so long.

I wanted... no needed to feel his bulging cock inside; throbbing my channel and taking me to the edge of passion and beyond.

I knew he wouldn't disappoint.

He stood, leaving me with my panties pushed to the side, and my dress hiked up over my hips.

“I need you inside of me, now,” I command, my voice firm, looking directly into his eyes.

He raises an eyebrow, clearly amused by my assertive tone. But the spark in his gaze tells me he finds my boldness incredibly alluring.

“Bossy, are we?” he teases, but the smirk on his face reveals just how much he enjoys it.

Without breaking eye contact, I raise myself up and begin to unbutton his shirt, revealing the hard planes of his chest, every muscle defined. He mimics my movements, his fingers deftly undoing the clasps of my dress.

A smirk plays on his lips as he takes in my body, his gaze intense and full of desire.

We continue our dance of undressing, each layer discarded heightening the tension between us. The world outside this tiny room inside his jet fades away, leaving only the two of us and the electric charge that pulses between us.

He waits for me to strip off his pants, which I do with great pleasure.

I can't help but admire the sight before me.

Roman, in all his glory, is a work of fucking art—strong, defined, and irresistibly masculine.

My gaze flits down to his manhood, standing tall and proud.

It was the most beautiful sight I've laid my eyes on.

I am one fucking lucky girl.

My fingers itch to touch him, to feel the heat of him.

Without hesitation, I wrap my hand around him, eliciting a low growl from Roman's lips.

His head tilts back, eyes hooded, but he manages to find his voice.

"I'm dying to be inside of you" he murmurs, the sound dripping with desire.

I pull him down on top of me on the bed.

Guiding him toward me, the tip of him brushes against my entrance, teasing us both with the promise of what's to come. At this moment, I realize I may very well have met my match in Roman.

A man whose confidence rivals my own, whose passion mirrors mine.

Without any more hesitation, he takes the lead and enters me.

The sensation indescribable.

A blend of pleasure, warmth, and connection envelopes me. Our bodies move in perfect harmony, a dance of desire and lust, as we chase the next pinnacle of pleasure together.

The sensation of Roman inside me is nothing short of divine.

Every inch of him fills me, stretching me in the most delicious way.

The way he moves is methodical and purposeful, each thrust timed to extract the maximum pleasure.

I can't help but marvel at how well we fit together—as if our bodies were designed specifically for one another.

Lying beneath him, my gaze travels over Roman's naked form, and I can't help but admire the landscape of taut muscles and sinew.

Every inch of him is a testament to strength and discipline.

From the chiseled lines of his abdomen to the broad expanse of his chest, he exudes a raw masculinity that makes my heart race. A few scars mar his skin, telling stories of battles fought — whether with other men or life itself, I can't tell. But rather than detracting from his allure, they add to it, painting him as a warrior, a survivor.

Intertwined with these scars are tattoos — some intricate, some simple — each one etching a piece of his journey onto his skin. There's something incredibly sexy about the way these tattoos curve with his muscles, beckoning me to explore every hidden meaning. As our eyes meet, a smirk forms on his lips, clearly aware of the effect he's having on me.

His hands roam my body, sending tingles everywhere they touch. When his fingers find my most sensitive spot, I gasp, arching into his touch. He chuckles, low and deep, clearly enjoying the effect he has on me. Our eyes lock, and I see the hunger in him, a passion that mirrors my own. His mouth

clamps down on one of my nipples, his tongue teasing me, tingles of pleasure running through me.

I surrender myself, body and soul, to the rhythmic dance of our lovemaking. With every caress, with every deep thrust, I can feel another climax building even more powerful than the last.

“Roman,” I breathe out, the world blurring as I teeter on the edge of ecstasy.

And he answers, not with words but with actions, pushing deeper, driving us both over the precipice. The world shatters, and I lose myself in the pure pleasure of the moment. It doesn't take long for him to follow, joining me in bliss.

As the waves of pleasure begin to ebb, our breaths sync up, and we lie entwined, basking in the afterglow.

“That was...” he begins, trailing off, seemingly lost for words.

“...unexpected,” I finish for him, a playful smile on my lips.

His laughter rumbles against my ear, the sound warm and comforting. “That's one way to put it.”

For a moment, I simply enjoy the feeling of being in his arms, the warmth of his body against mine, the steady beat of his heart. But then reality crashes over us. The weight of my betrayal presses down on me, reminding me of the mission I've set out to achieve—his death. How can I reconcile this? The warmth and passion we just shared with the cold, hard truth?

Yet, in this fleeting moment, I push those thoughts aside. For now, I'll enjoy the comfort of his embrace, the sensation of being truly seen and desired. Because, come what may, these memories will stay with me forever.

## CHAPTER 11

The blustery winter morning paints the city in shades of gray, the chilling wind carrying whispers of secrets. A thick blanket of clouds conceals the sun, giving the atmosphere an almost melancholic touch. Just days earlier, I was cocooned in the warmth of Roman's embrace, our bodies lost in a rhythm known only to us. But now, I stand in the cold ambiance of the investment banker's office, ready to execute a far different dance — one of death.

In my pocket, I carry a vial of pale liquid — a concoction perfected over the years for its efficacy and stealth. The poison, derived from a rare South American plant, is undetectable in postmortem toxicology screens, making it my tool of choice for these more refined hits. It works swiftly, numbing the body first, then shutting down the respiratory system, giving its victims a deceptively peaceful departure. Just like all my favorite poisons, it will look like nothing more than life cut tragically short by a sudden heart attack.

The corrupt banker, oblivious to my intentions, sips his scotch as we discuss the funds he swindled from my brother. I notice his glass is almost empty, a prime opportunity.

“Another drink?” I offer, pouring him a refill before he can answer. As he turns away to retrieve some documents, I discreetly release a few drops of the poison into his glass. By the time he faces me again, the deed is done.

We continue talking for a few minutes, but I'm counting the seconds. Just as he's outlining his escape plan, his face becomes ashen. He gasps, clutching his chest, eyes widening

in realization, but it's too late. He collapses, and in moments, it's over.

With a final look around the office, I'm about to exit when my phone vibrates. A message from Roman illuminates the screen: *Thinking of you. What are you up to?*

The juxtaposition of my deadly profession with this burgeoning romance is staggering.

I quickly respond. *Wrapping up some business. Coffee later?*

His reply is swift. *Absolutely. 1 PM?*

The stark contrast between my two worlds leaves me breathless. Here I am, a skilled assassin who can weave tales of poison and death, yet at the same time, I'm a woman caught up in the whirlwind of new romance. The combination is both dangerous and exhilarating. Every text with Roman feels like a secret dance of its own — one where the steps are unknown, and the outcome is anyone's guess.

A short time later I'm with Roman, the two of us seated by the windows. Steam from our coffees dances up into the cool air, mingling with my exhales as I try to get my bearings in the quaint café we've settled in. The cozy ambiance of the place contrasts with the sharp tension building in the pit of my stomach.

"How's your day been?" I ask, my voice feigning casual interest. The inner storm, however, rages just beneath the surface.

Roman, oblivious to the battle I'm waging on the inside, sips from his cup and sets it down, his eyes meeting mine. "Productive," he says, that confident smirk of his creeping onto his lips. "I just acquired a new developmental lot. Prime location."

I lean forward, intrigued. "Where?"

"Right in the middle of Chechen territory," he announces, pride evident in his voice. As if he's just won a grand prize, and not potentially signed his own death warrant.

Alarm bells start ringing loud and clear in my mind. My heart thuds painfully against my chest. The implications of this acquisition are glaringly obvious to me. The Bratva wouldn't buy land in Chechen territory without an ulterior motive. Is this a sign of their intent to muscle in on our operations? And if so, does Vladimir know about it?

My fingers tighten around the ceramic mug, its warmth doing nothing to soothe the cold dread snaking through my veins. I fix my gaze on Roman, searching for any sign that he understands the gravity of what he's just divulged.

"Roman," I say, struggling to keep my voice steady, "do you realize what you've done?"

He raises an eyebrow, looking almost amused. "Bought a piece of land? Yes, I'm aware."

"It's not just any piece of land. That's Chechen territory. Are you deliberately trying to start a war?"

His demeanor shifts slightly, his smirk fading. "Business is business, Valentina. The land was for sale, and I saw potential. It's a strategic move. Nothing more."

I scoff, incredulous at his nonchalance. "Strategic? You're playing with fire."

He leans back, assessing me with those piercing green eyes. "You seem unusually invested in this. Why is it bothering you so much?"

It's a valid question, and one I'm not ready to answer. How can I explain my allegiance to the Chechens without revealing my true identity? The weight of the secrets I carry feels heavier at this moment.

"Let's just say I've seen how territorial disputes play out," I reply vaguely. "It's messy. And I thought... I *hoped* you had more sense than to get involved in something like that."

He chuckles, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "I've been in the game long enough to know the risks. Besides, maybe it's time for some new management in that part of town."

I inhale sharply, the implications of his words sinking in. This isn't just about land. It's about power, control, dominance. And it terrifies me.

Our coffees sit forgotten between us as we size each other up, both of us acutely aware the stakes have just been raised. Part of me wants to warn him, to make him see the danger he's in. But there's another part, the part loyal to my Chechen roots, that wonders if I should let him learn the hard way. It would make my job easier.

Regardless, the line between us, once blurry with passion, has sharpened into something far more dangerous. And I'm not sure which side I'm on anymore.

Roman's fingers brush against mine as we leave the café, a hint of warmth that battles the cold winter chill. He's playful, and a part of me is wary. But I find my steps in sync with his as we walk. I feel his energy, a mix of confidence and excitement, and I find myself curious despite the earlier confrontation.

"There's something I'd like to show you," he says, the lightheartedness back in his voice.

Within a few blocks, he stops us in front of a vast, empty lot, fenced off and covered with thin patches of snow and remnants of old construction. Its vastness makes it stand out, and I tilt my head, trying to imagine what he sees.

"This," he starts, sweeping an arm out, "is my next project. I have plans to open a range of shops here. You know, businesses that'll cater to the locals."

The revelation should surprise me, but it doesn't. Roman's ambition is clear in his every move. Still, knowing his line of work, I can see the potential for some clandestine operations underneath all that commercial glitter.

But his expression softens, and he points to a particular corner of the lot. "Over there, I thought we'd have an open garden, a playground of sorts. After seeing Ilya playing, I realized there aren't many safe places in this city where kids can just be kids."

My heart skips a beat. He's thinking of Ilya?

“The idea is simple. Plant trees, add swings, a slide, and an open space where parents can watch their children play. Every child should have that, don't you think?” he asks, turning those intense emerald eyes on me.

The words catch in my throat, a mix of surprise and emotion. Roman's showing me a side of him I didn't expect. Yes, there's the businessman, the potential mob boss, the dangerous alpha male. But this? This is someone who cares, someone who's seen a need and wants to address it. It's a side of him that's both confusing and endearing.

Before I can process it, I find myself stepping closer to him, my fingers brushing against his cheek. And then I'm kissing him. The world blurs, and there's only this moment, this man, and the rush of feelings threatening to overwhelm me.

As we pull apart, his eyes search mine, and I can see his surprise. And perhaps something more. A vulnerability?

It makes my job that much harder. My mission hasn't changed, but Roman has thrown a wrench into my plans, making everything infinitely more complex. I both adore and despise this softer side of him. It's drawing me in, but it's also tearing me apart. Because every sweet gesture, every thoughtful word, is a reminder of the truth I'm trying so desperately to ignore: ending him will be no easy feat.

The late afternoon air carries the bite of winter's breath, hinting at a forecasted snowfall. Each step toward my apartment feels unhurried and drawn out, like we're stretching the seconds. Roman's fingers lace through mine, his touch grounding me amidst the whirlwind of emotions he conjures.

Standing outside my door, he seems larger than life—more daunting, more magnetic. He casts a long shadow under the dim hallway light, and as I look up to meet his gaze, the connection between us is palpable. Like always, it's a mix of chemistry and danger, swirling together in a heady concoction.

We don't speak, not with words. Instead, our lips find each other's in a soft, intimate embrace. It's a slow burn that sends warmth tingling down my spine, melting away the frost of the outside world. And yet, in the midst of it, there's a niggling sense of unease. It feels like the prickle of unseen eyes, the sensation of being observed.

I pull back, searching the vicinity, scanning each shadow and alcove, but nothing seems out of place. Yet the feeling persists.

Brushing it off as mere paranoia—a byproduct of my profession—I refocus on the man before me. “I don't have to pick up Ilya for another couple of hours,” I mention, an invitation hanging in my words. “Do you want to come in?”

Roman's eyes darken a shade, his desire evident. Without verbalizing it, he communicates everything: his yearning, his admiration, his hesitations, all laid bare.

“I thought you'd never ask,” he murmurs.

In a swift movement, he closes the distance, his mouth reclaiming mine with a breathtaking ferocity. Passion flares, stoked by anticipation and need. My keys almost fall to the ground in my haste to unlock the door, our lips barely parting as we make our way inside.

Yet, in the depths of my mind, the sense of being watched lingers, casting a faint shadow on an otherwise perfect day.

## CHAPTER 12

**A**s soon as the door shuts behind us, Valentina and I are a tangle of lips, hands, and the intoxicating scent of her perfume. With every step, every stolen kiss, we're drawn deeper into the apartment.

I pause for a moment, pulling back slightly, just enough to take in her living space. The apartment is snug, emitting an air of warmth, decorated with a blend of practicality and personality. Here, in the heart of this cozy maze, a mother and her son make memories. Toys—trucks, blocks, and action figures—lie scattered on the floor and shelves, each telling a silent tale of playtime and giggles.

There's a series of photographs on the wall, capturing snapshots of joy. I see Valentina, radiating happiness, holding Ilya, laughing with all the innocence in the world. This place is a sanctuary, and I feel the weight of being invited into such an intimate space.

But the ambiance, the understanding of her life, is a fleeting moment in my consciousness. The magnetic pull between us is hard to ignore, and with a swift move, I pull her to me, feeling the warmth of her body melding perfectly with mine.

Her hands are eager, confident as they find the hem of my shirt, slipping underneath to graze my skin. I reciprocate, fingers dancing along the zipper of her dress, revealing the soft curves beneath. Our eyes lock, and for a moment, it's like the world stills. There's an understanding—a silent promise of

what's to come, of the intensity that's been building between us.

She lets out a breathy laugh, her lips brushing against my neck. "Impatient, aren't we?"

"Always," I reply with a grin, the cocky edge in my voice evident. "Especially when I know what I want."

With a fluid motion, she manages to shed the last of her clothing, leaving her in all her exquisite glory. And I, ever the gentleman, follow suit. Our lips reunite and we become lost in each other.

The journey from the door to her bedroom feels like a dance. Our lips never part, our bodies never break contact. Every step, every brush of skin against skin, feeds the flame of desire coursing through my veins. Her touch is electric, and the world shrinks down to just the two of us.

Finally, we break apart at the edge of her bed, both of us catching our breath. I gaze down at her, and for a moment, I feel like the world's most fortunate man. The dim light of her bedroom casts an ethereal glow upon Valentina's silhouette, accentuating her every curve and shadow.

Her breasts rise and fall with each heavy breath, straining against the sheer fabric of her lace bra. A matching set, the fabric does little to conceal her, instead highlighting the delicate curve of her hips and the graceful length of her legs. The underwear is a tantalizing barrier, hinting at hidden pleasures.

Her mischievous eyes, always so sharp, now carry a softer kind of intensity. Those eyes never leave mine, even as she gracefully drops to her knees. Her sly, confident smile promises things unsaid, and I swallow hard, gripped by anticipation.

She's close enough that I can feel the warmth of her breath against me, and when she finally takes me into her mouth, the sensation is nothing short of exquisite. Every move she makes is deliberate, calculated to drive me wild. The gentle graze of

her teeth, the soft lap of her tongue, the delicate suction – all are designed to take me to the edge and hold me there.

My fingers tangle in her hair, guiding and urging her on, yet she takes charge of the pace. She knows exactly what she's doing, and the cocky, dominant part of me is both challenged and immensely turned on by her confidence. She plays me like an instrument, evoking notes of pleasure I hadn't known existed. Every second is a test of my restraint, a game of cat and mouse where she is both the predator and the prey.

I glance down, and the sight of her there, so intimately engaged, is almost my undoing. There's a gleam in her eyes that tells me she knows her power, and she revels in it. I've never met anyone quite like Valentina, and in that heated moment, with her teasing and tempting me beyond reason, I know I'm utterly captivated.

Teetering on the precipice of surrender, I suddenly pull Valentina away, inhaling sharply. We're both breathing hard, and the air between us is thick with desire and expectation. She looks up at me, her lips swollen, the remnants of our play glistening on them, and her eyes glinting with mischief.

“Was I not up to standard?” she teases, feigning innocence. Her voice is low, sultry, a perfect contrast to the playful twinkle in her eyes.

I chuckle, letting the weight of my gaze linger on her mouth, then trail up to meet her eyes. “Oh, darling,” I reply, a smirk playing on my lips, “you exceeded all expectations. But I think it's time I showed you just how well I can reciprocate.”

Her eyes flash with challenge, but before she can retort, I'm on her. In a flurry of hands and mouths, I deftly unfasten her bra, sliding it off her shoulders and letting it fall to the ground. Her skin is warm, flushed, and invitingly soft beneath my fingers. With gentle but insistent hands, I guide her back onto the bed, and as she falls, I remove the last barrier of her lace panties.

Taking a moment to appreciate her in her full glory, I marvel at her beauty. Her body is a symphony of curves, soft in places, taut in others, begging to be touched, tasted. Unable

to resist any longer, I get to work, paying homage to every inch of her. She spreads her legs and I take hold of the base of my cock, gliding it into her warmth, Valentina's back arching as I drive deeply inside.

My hands and mouth traverse her body, leaving trails of fiery kisses and caresses. I listen intently, tuning into the rhythm of her breathing, the soft moans she tries to stifle, the involuntary twitch of her muscles. Each reaction is a guide, steering me to the spots she wants me to linger. I push into her again and again, splitting her in half with my thickness, her hips bucking up into mine.

The more I tease, the more she writhes beneath me, trying to pull me closer. She's so responsive, so beautifully expressive, that it drives me wild. And as I feel her nearing the peak, I pull away, leaving her gasping, hovering at the edge of bliss.

"Roman," she breathes out, a touch of desperation in her voice, "please."

I hover above her, enjoying the flushed hue of her cheeks, the way her chest rises and falls rapidly. I lean in, whispering against her ear, "Please what, my dear?"

Her eyes, dark and dilated, lock onto mine. "Don't play coy with me," she admonishes, a playful edge to her tone.

I chuckle, letting my fingers trace delicate patterns on her thigh. "I want to hear you ask for it."

A mixture of annoyance and arousal paints her features. "Roman," she hisses, and the weight of her desire is palpable. Then, softer, surrendering, "Please, make me come."

It's the invitation I've been waiting for. Smiling with wolfish pleasure, I set out with renewed fervor to give her exactly what she's asked for.

I'm fully sheathed inside her, and the sensation is overwhelming, every nerve ending alight. With every movement, every thrust, I feel her body responding in kind, arching toward me, urging me deeper. I savor the sounds she

makes, those soft, breathless moans fanning the flames of my passion even higher.

The rhythm builds, becoming almost frantic. I can sense how close she is, the tension winding tighter and tighter within her. She clings to me, fingers digging into my back, her breath coming in ragged gasps. And when she finally reaches the pinnacle, her release is a thing of beauty. Her entire body convulses, and a deep, shuddering sigh escapes her lips. Feeling her climax, her internal walls clutching me so intimately, is enough to send me over the edge too. I surrender to the pleasure, letting it wash over me in wave after euphoric wave.

The intensity of our lovemaking leaves us both breathless. Slowly, gently, I pull out of her, rolling over onto my back, pulling her close so her head rests on my chest. We lay there, spent, listening to the cadence of each other's breathing, feeling the warmth of shared satisfaction.

Our fingers lazily intertwine, and I bring her hand to my lips, pressing soft kisses against her knuckles. The quiet between us is serene, filled with a wordless understanding. It's in moments like this, where the world fades and it's just the two of us, that I feel an almost overwhelming tenderness for Valentina. There's a vulnerability in the way she looks at me, her dark eyes shimmering with unshed tears of emotion.

"Valentina," I murmur, the words spilling out unbidden, "there's something... something incredibly surreal about this. About us."

She props herself up on one elbow, looking down at me, her hair cascading around her face like a silken curtain. "What do you mean?"

I take a moment to gather my thoughts, searching for the right words. "It's like... I feel like I've known you forever. It's bizarre. We've only had a handful of encounters, yet here I am, feeling like you've been a part of my life for ages."

A wistful smile graces her lips. "Maybe in another life, we were lovers. Do you believe in reincarnation?"

I chuckle softly, caressing her face. “I’m not sure what I believe. But I can’t deny the connection between us. It’s palpable, almost tangible. Like I can reach out and touch it.”

She nods, her fingers playing with the hairs on my chest. “I feel it too. It’s both comforting and a little terrifying.”

“Terrifying?” I raise an eyebrow inquisitively.

She sighs. “Because, Roman, it means what we have is real. And real things... they can break.”

I pull her close, wrapping my arms around her protectively. “Then we’ll just have to be careful with each other, won’t we?”

She nods against my chest, and we let the comforting silence envelop us once more before getting to our feet and finding our discarded clothing.

Slipping on her clothes with a practiced efficiency, Valentina barely meets my gaze. There’s a slight flush on her cheeks, but whether from our recent escapades or something else, I’m not entirely sure. I watch her every move, fascinated by the interplay of emotions playing out on her face.

“Ilya?” I inquire, buttoning up my shirt, the fabric soft against my still-sensitive skin.

She nods, pulling on her shoes. “Daycare ends soon.”

I stride over, tucking a loose strand of her hair behind her ear, allowing my fingers to trail down her neck. She leans into the touch, her eyes closing for a brief moment. “How about a trip soon? Somewhere the three of us can have a little fun. The zoo maybe?”

Her eyes light up, and for a moment, the guarded look she often wears falls away. “Ilya would love that. And so would I,” she admits, a smile tugging at her lips.

We’re in the middle of making plans when the unmistakable sound of a door opening interrupts us. A rush of cold air sweeps into the corridor, sending a shiver down my spine. Valentina’s face loses its color, her posture going rigid.

Concerned, I follow her gaze and find myself locking eyes with a stranger in her entrance way.

He's tall, with the same shade of dark hair as Valentina and a brooding, intense look that makes me instantly wary. I can feel the tension in the room spike, the atmosphere growing heavy with unspoken words and hidden animosities.

"Who the hell is this?" he demands, his voice cold. I take an instinctive, protective step in front of Valentina.

She swallows, her hand coming to rest on my arm in a feeble attempt to calm me. "Roman, this is Vladimir. My brother."

My surprise must be evident because she gives me a tight-lipped smile, her gaze never leaving her brother's.

"Vlad, what are you doing here?"

Vladimir's eyes are still on me, sizing me up, weighing my worth. "I'm here to talk, Sister," he replies, voice dripping with contempt. "You've been hard to reach the last few days. Perhaps now I know why."

Valentina's grip on my arm tightens, her nails digging in. "Not now, Vladimir. This isn't the time."

He smirks, stepping further into the apartment, looking around with disdain. "Looks like I interrupted something."

The edge in his voice is unmistakable, the underlying threat clear as day. I'm no stranger to confrontations, but there's something about Vladimir that makes my blood run frigid. Perhaps it's the coldness in his eyes or the way he carries himself. Whatever it is, I know I need to tread carefully.

"Perhaps it's best if you leave," Valentina suggests to me, clearly making an effort to keep her voice calm and level.

Valentina's brother merely raises an eyebrow, his smirk growing wider. "Yes – that sounds like a good idea."

Part of me wants to challenge him, to wipe that smug smirk off his face. But my diplomatic side takes over before I

can. “Of course. Far be it from me to intrude on family matters.”

The look on Vladimir’s face suggests mild disappointment, as if he’d been hoping I’d say something that would give him justification to do something stupid.

“Smart man. Now, off with you.”

No one speaks to me like that. My instinct is to crush him, to grab his face with my palm and smash the back of his head through the wall behind him. I quickly push those sentiments to the side. It’s not the time for such violence.

Instead, I glance over my shoulder. Valentina gives me a knowing look as I step out of the apartment, the door shutting behind me.

Moments later, I’m outside, bracing myself against the unending winter chill, loneliness wrapped around me tightly as my coat.

## CHAPTER 13

VALENTINA

The weight of his absence presses on me like a heavy cloak the moment Roman is gone. The world, which moments ago was a cacophony of emotions—lust, fear, tension, joy—seems abruptly muted. Every sound, every sensation, feels distant and indistinct. It's as if I'm underwater, lost in the enigma that is Roman.

But then, an all-too-familiar voice slices through the quiet, tugging me back to the surface. “What’s going on, Valentina?”

I turn, facing Vladimir, his eyes scrutinizing, sharp like a falcon’s. The history between us is long, winding, and often treacherous. We’ve always walked a fine line between trust and suspicion.

“I’ve been watching,” he continues, his tone icy. “This isn’t just business with him, is it?”

I gather my strength, forcing myself into the role I’ve perfected over the years—the stoic, unyielding assassin. “He’s my next target,” I admit, pushing down the unease. “I’m getting close to him, just as I was instructed.”

Vladimir studies me, the weight of his gaze making my skin prickle. “You’ve never let a target get this close before. You’re playing a dangerous game.”

I stiffen, defensive. “I know what I’m doing.”

“Do you?” he counters, a sardonic smile playing on his lips. “Because from where I stand, it looks like you’re getting entangled in a web you might not be able to escape easily.”

I grind my teeth, feeling the heat of anger bubble within. “This is different. He’s not like the others. Roman has connections, information we need. My approach is calculated.”

Vladimir narrows his eyes, searching my face for any hint of deceit. “You better not fuck this up. The family is relying on you to handle this discreetly and efficiently. You know the consequences of failure.”

I swallow hard, the gravity of the situation weighing on me. “I won’t fail.”

He nods slowly, clearly not entirely convinced. “See that you don’t. Because if you let feelings get in the way, if you slip up even for a moment, it’s not just you who pays the price.”

I hold his gaze, letting the threat sink in. Vladimir may be family, but he’s also the gatekeeper of our secrets. His allegiance isn’t to me, it’s to the cause, the larger picture.

The room grows heavy with unspoken warnings, promises of retribution should things go awry. But deep down, a small voice nags at me. The line between duty and desire has blurred, and as much as I want to deny it, Roman isn’t just another mark on my list. He’s wormed his way into places I never thought I’d allow anyone to reach, and now, I’m trapped in a dilemma of my own making.

And while Vladimir stands there, exuding authority and warning, I realize the greatest threat isn’t the mission itself or even the wrath of my family. It’s the battle raging within me, a clash between the heart and duty.

The moment Vladimir and I lock eyes once again, the atmosphere becomes electrically tense, charged with unsaid words and emotions.

“Valentina,” he begins, pacing the room slowly with an air of contemplation. His gaze never leaves mine, the intensity never wavering. “I’ve been aware of Roman’s identity for a while now.”

My heart thuds, its rhythm erratic. “Why didn’t you tell me earlier?” The betrayal stings, coming from the one person I thought I could always trust.

Vladimir stops pacing, leaning against the back of a worn-out armchair, crossing his arms. “I was curious,” he admits, a hint of mischief in his eyes. “Wanted to see how you’d play it. It’s not like the Ghost to become so entangled with her prey.” He takes a deliberate pause, allowing the weight of his words to sink in. “Especially not in... intimate ways.”

My cheeks blaze with embarrassment and anger. I hate that he’s right, and even more, I hate that he’s seen right through me. “Is this your way of accusing me of being unprofessional?” I challenge, taking a step closer to him. “Or are you simply making an observation?”

The corner of his mouth tilts up in a smirk, a familiar expression that used to bring warmth to my heart, but now only adds to my aggravation. “Merely an observation. But it’s fascinating, isn’t it? You’ve always kept a distance, never allowing emotions to bleed into your work. Yet now... now there’s Roman.”

The defensiveness surges inside me, ready to spill over. “Are you insinuating I can’t handle this? That I’m somehow compromised?”

Vladimir pushes off from the armchair, advancing until we’re merely feet apart. “It’s not a matter of capability, Valentina. I know you’re more than capable. It’s a question of clarity. Can you see clearly through the haze of attraction? Or are emotions clouding your judgment?”

Memories of my time with Roman flood back—the passion, the intensity, the undeniable connection we’ve forged in such a short time. Yet underneath it all, the mission has always been lurking, the shadow I can’t shake off.

Part of me hates that Vladimir can see through me so easily. Then again, he is my brother. Who knew me this well if not him?

“I remember why I’m in this,” I whisper fiercely, clenching my fists to keep them steady. “I remember every night, every tear shed for Iosef. That pain, that rage, it’s burned into me.”

His face softens, the edge gone. In its place is the brother I grew up with, the one who shielded me from the worst of the world, who taught me how to survive. “I know,” he says, reaching out to place a hand on my shoulder. “But Roman... he’s different. I see it in your eyes. I just want you to remember who you are, what you stand for. What his family has done to you.”

The weight of our shared history, our losses, our triumphs, presses down on me. “I will do what needs to be done,” I reply, determination firming my voice. “For the Chechens, for Iosef, for us. Roman won’t change that.”

Vladimir nods slowly, his eyes searching mine for any hint of doubt. “I believe you,” he finally says, his tone heavy with unspoken emotions. “But remember, the heart has its own agenda. Be careful, Valentina.”

His warning hangs in the air between us, a reminder of the tangled web I’m now a part of, and the choices I’ll soon have to make.



Darkness seeps into the city as evening approaches, bringing with it a cold chill that seems to penetrate even the thickest of coats. But for me, the cold isn’t just on the outside; it’s an internal battle, a freezing grip on my heart that intensifies with every step I take. I’ve been spending the evening gathering more information on the Bratva’s activities in the city for Vlad.

A soft beep alerts me to an incoming message from Vladimir. *Any updates?*

Gathering a deep breath, I reply, typing swiftly. *Roman’s been investing in businesses on our turf.*

There's a pause before his response appears. *Interesting. Anything else?*

*Just that. But it's enough, isn't it?* I reply, more to myself than to him.

His reply is immediate. *It's a start. We'll take the necessary precautions. Thanks for the intel.*

Turning off my phone, I find myself leaning against the brick wall of a nearby building. The weight of everything presses down, making me feel as though I'm being crushed under the gravity of my own decisions. Every move I make, every morsel of information I share, is like a piece in a giant chess game, and the stakes are life and death.

I glance around, half-expecting to see Roman's face among the passersby. The mix of feelings he stirs within me is like a potent cocktail – dangerous and intoxicating. Guilt is the dominant flavor, with an undercurrent of yearning and regret.

The temptation to warn him is powerful. A niggling voice in the back of my mind suggests perhaps I could send him an anonymous tip-off. But to do so would betray Vladimir. My brother, my flesh and blood. The person who's been by my side through thick and thin. I remember the nights we'd huddle together for warmth, the promises we made to always protect each other. How can I choose Roman, a virtual stranger, over my own family?

Yet, a larger part of me screams out, reminding me of Roman's touch, his passion, his dreams. How can I be the architect of his doom?

An idea begins to form. What if I could find a middle ground? A solution that wouldn't require taking sides? Maybe if the Chechens and the Bratva could come to some understanding, some truce... But such things are rare in this world, and when they do happen, they're often short-lived.

As the night deepens, I find myself outside Roman's building. The lure is too strong, the need to see him, to warn him, almost overpowering. But I resist, forcing myself to walk away.

*New assignment. Urgent*, the text reads. An attachment follows, which I promptly open. There, in cold, digital clarity, is a face I don't recognize. A businessman, judging by his tailored suit and slicked-back hair. He looks like a man used to power, to having his commands followed.

I read the briefing. This man, Paul Rutherford, a British expat living in St. Petersburg, has made a series of bad decisions that have put him on the Chechen mob's radar. Decisions that require a swift and silent correction.

*Take him out within twenty-four hours*, Vladimir's message ends, no room for argument or delay.

I swipe the message away, the weight of another life, another decision, pressing down on me. What choice do I have? Refusing isn't an option. Raising suspicions or hesitating in this line of work can be a death sentence. I've seen it before — colleagues and acquaintances who've hesitated or second-guessed, only to disappear without a trace.

With Roman on my mind and the ever-growing complexities surrounding our entanglement, now isn't the time to falter. Now, more than ever, I need to prove my loyalty and dedication to the cause.

Scanning the digital file, I pick out the necessary details. Rutherford's habits, his daily routine, his likes and dislikes. I mentally sift through my tools and resources, deciding on a plan. With someone of his stature, the job needs to be quiet, discreet, with no traces leading back to the Chechen mob or to me.

When I'm satisfied with my preliminary work, I tuck my phone into my pocket and start off. However, my thoughts once more return to Roman. As I move through the darkened streets, the question remains: How can I save him without losing myself?

## CHAPTER 14

The streets of the city gleam under the lamplight, the lingering rain casting them in an ethereal glow. I'm driving aimlessly, trying to gather my thoughts after that peculiar encounter with Valentina's brother. His piercing gaze, their tense exchange, and most unsettling of all, the palpable fear in Valentina's eyes. It's a side of her I haven't seen, and it has my gut twisted in knots.

My mind keeps replaying the scene, analyzing each word, each movement. Valentina's always been an enigma to me. Bold and fierce, yet always guarded. Always controlled. But seeing her like this, vulnerable, has raised questions, suspicions.

Pulling over to the side of the road, I take out my phone, unlocking it and launching a search engine. Let's see... "Valentina..." I pause. Shit. I don't even know her last name. Shaking my head at my own folly, I go for the obvious and type "Valentina St. Petersburg."

Page after page of profiles pop up. Some match her age, some her city, but none match her face. Unyielding, I switch to Instagram, then LinkedIn, even TikTok, hoping for a trace, a glimpse into the world she's hiding. But Valentina remains elusive, a phantom amid the digital age.

An idea strikes me. I visit some local directories, thinking maybe she's involved in some community events, charities, or local businesses. Again, zilch. It's like she doesn't exist outside of the spaces we've shared.

Rubbing my temple, I'm forced to acknowledge the unsettling truth — despite our recent closeness, I know next to nothing about her. Sure, there have been shared laughs, deep conversations, and burning passion, but the core of Valentina, her history, her world, remains a mystery.

It dawns on me that this isn't mere coincidence. Anyone can have a minimal digital footprint, but Valentina has none at all. It's almost...professional. Could she be in some form of witness protection? Is she hiding from someone? Is she involved in something more clandestine? The questions pile up, and for the first time since I've known her, I wonder if I'm out of my depth.

With a growl of frustration, I throw my phone on the passenger seat and restart the engine. The rain has picked up again, the droplets hammering on the roof, echoing the turmoil in my head. I can't just let this go. Not when the woman I'm rapidly falling for could be in danger.

Despite my vast network, my reach, and resources, I'm cautious about leveraging them to pry into her past. But I have this nagging feeling that if I don't, I might regret it later. It's a tightrope walk between my burgeoning feelings and the protective instincts that have kept me alive and on top in this cutthroat world.

As I weave through the city streets, the cold logic of my businessman persona clashes with the infatuated lover. It's clear I need to approach this with tact. Maybe a casual conversation, a few offhand questions during our next meeting. Observe, analyze, understand.



The sun pierces through the dense canopy of St. Petersburg's buildings, casting their colossal shadows over the city streets. As I stride with purpose, the city seems to move with me, bending to my every whim. That's the beauty of power and influence; the world becomes clay in your hands, ready to be molded.

Slipping out of my sleek, black sedan, I adjust the collar of my tailored suit and turn to face the new day. The past few weeks have been exceedingly fruitful. The old bookstore on the corner of Nevsky Prospekt, the antique shop by the Winter Palace, and that charming little café where Valentina and I shared our first espresso together, all now operate under the protective shadow of the Bratva.

These acquisitions, while seemingly benign, serve a much grander strategy. St. Petersburg is changing, evolving, and with each acquisition, our roots deepen, our influence grows, and our legacy solidifies. My brothers will surely be thrilled. It's not just about money or territory, but about weaving ourselves into the very fabric of the city, ensuring the Bratva's place for generations to come.

Lost in thought, the jarring buzz of my phone snaps me back to the moment. Retrieving it from my pocket, I squint at the screen, puzzled by the unknown caller. It's rare for an unrecognized number to break through my layers of security, making me both wary and intrigued.

"Hello?" I answer cautiously, eyes darting around, trying to discern if this is part of a bigger play.

"You need to run. Now."

The line goes dead.

The abrupt disconnection of the call leaves a cold knot of uncertainty in my stomach. The soft, distorted voice wasn't recognizable, but there's a haunting familiarity to it. All the same, I'm now on guard, scanning my surroundings for any hint of danger. Before I can further process the unsettling warning, my peripheral vision captures movement. A group of men, dark eyes narrowing in on me, begin to approach from across the street.

Immediately, every fiber of my being goes on high alert. The purpose in their steps, the glint of metal under jackets, and the unmistakable markings inked on their necks and hands—tattoos of stars, daggers, and various other symbols I've come to associate with one group: the Chechen mob.

Time seems to warp, seconds elongating, becoming minute-long heartbeats. Calculations race through my mind. I'm outnumbered, outgunned, and at a significant disadvantage. As much as every instinct within me screams to stand my ground and fight, my rational mind knows this isn't a fight I can win—especially not here, not in broad daylight.

Without betraying a hint of my internal panic, I pivot smoothly, heading straight for my parked sedan, doing my best to appear as casual as possible. But as I approach, the menacing growl of one of the men ripples through the air, followed by the unmistakable cocking of a firearm. My pace quickens.

The sound of gunfire shatters the midday stillness. The bullets whistle past, slamming into the asphalt and the side of buildings. Panic surges among the bystanders, who start running for cover. I jump into the car, gunning the engine and pulling out into the street.

More gunshots ring out, one bullet piercing the rear window, sending shattered glass flying inside. My heart's pounding in my ears, the adrenaline surging, making everything feel razor-sharp. With one last look through the rear-view mirror, I see the Chechens slowing their pursuit, watching me with predatory, narrowed eyes.

Once I'm a safe distance away, I fish out my encrypted phone, dialing the number I know by heart. It only takes a few rings before my eldest brother, Andrei, picks up.

"Roman," he greets, his voice its usual, steady self. "To what do I owe this call?"

"No pleasantries, Andryusha," I respond, urgency evident in my voice. "I've been ambushed by the Chechens."

Silence, a short but palpable pause. When he speaks again, his tone is noticeably colder. "Are you hurt?"

"Unharméd. But they've made a statement. I think I've stepped into something bigger than just business acquisitions."

Andrei exhales slowly. "We knew expanding into St. Petersburg would ruffle some feathers, but this is a blatant act

of aggression. We'll need to respond, and quickly."

I nod, even though he can't see me. "Agreed. I want to know who tipped them off and who the woman on the phone that warned me was."

"We'll find out," he says, a note of lethal promise in his voice. "Lay low for a bit, let me handle the immediate retaliation. And Roman..." he pauses, "be careful. They wouldn't have ambushed you in broad daylight and in public without a good reason. This goes deeper than we thought. I'm going to have Damien send you some of the information he's been gathering on the Chechen presence in St. Petersburg. Look it over, glean what you can."

The weight of the situation sinks in. It's no longer just a turf war, and I'm not just a businessman. I've become a marked man in a game of deadly stakes and I'm far away from the safety of my family.

Disconnecting the call, I lean back in the car seat, allowing myself a brief moment of vulnerability. The voice from the call echoes in my mind. A warning, a chance, a lifeline. Whoever she is, she saved my life today. The question is, why?

## CHAPTER 15

**B**ack at my apartment, the weighty doors shut out the rest of the world, creating a bubble of silence. I still feel a rush of adrenaline, but it's ebbing now, replaced by a need to piece things together. I tap into the encrypted files my brothers sent over and begin to review.

As I dig deeper into the data, it becomes clear our previous intel on the Chechen mob's operations in St. Petersburg was lacking. They might not have the same sprawling reach as we do in Moscow, but in terms of ruthlessness and determination, they appear to be a match. There's a mix of legal ventures to disguise their illicit activities and a slew of underground operations. Classic mob strategy, and I have to admit, they've played their cards well so far.

The files display photographs of known members, several mugshots, and surveillance images. Lists of their assets, informants, and foot soldiers span across my screen. Yet, among all the faces, there's one who catches my attention, making my heart miss a beat. Vladimir Korochov – the leader of their St. Petersburg operations. His sharp, angular features stare back at me, a determined look in his eyes.

Valentina's brother...I take a few deep breaths, trying to compose my racing thoughts. My initial shock gradually morphs into a sense of betrayal. Vladimir is Valentina's brother; does that mean she is involved as well? Was it all an act? Every touch, every glance, every whispered word—was she playing me from the start?

But then, I recall the distorted voice on the phone, the warning that saved me. Could it have been her? If she truly wanted me dead, why the warning? My mind races as I grapple with the conflicting pieces of this puzzle. Is she a genuine threat, or is she as trapped in this game as I am?

The room feels colder, the lights dimmer. I throw back a shot of whiskey, letting the warmth ground me. My brothers need to be informed of this, but first, I have to confront Valentina. I need to hear her side of the story, understand her role in all of this.

For perhaps the first time in my life, I'm unsure of my next step. My instincts tell me to trust her, but the evidence suggests otherwise. As I grapple with my thoughts, one thing becomes crystal clear: I've been pulled into a web of intrigue that goes deeper than just business deals and territory wars.

Valentina isn't just a woman I've grown fond of; she's now the key to understanding the shadowy nexus of St. Petersburg's underworld. And whether she's my ally or enemy, I intend to find out.

Later, I'm in my car, the city lights casting a hazy glow as I steer towards Valentina's neighborhood. My mind is a maze of questions and half-formed conclusions. Every interaction we've had replays in my mind. Was there a hint, a sign I missed? Was the vulnerability in her eyes genuine, or just another layer of her enigmatic persona, a carefully crafted deception?

I keep replaying our first meeting. She was stunning in that elegant dress, her laughter light and infectious. But now that I think about it, her departure after the mayor's sudden death was awfully rushed. A woman like Valentina doesn't leave a gala out of simple boredom. There was more to it, and my gut tells me it has everything to do with whatever secrets she's been hiding.

Parking discreetly a few houses down from hers, I can't shake off the sensation that I'm treading on dangerous grounds. I'm not just dealing with a personal betrayal; I'm

dealing with a potential threat. Her connection to Vladimir and the Chechen mob changes everything.

I switch off the engine and lean back in my seat, taking a moment to scan her apartment building. It's quaint, with an elegant charm—much like her. It's quiet, save for the occasional rustle of leaves and distant sounds of traffic. For a while, I just observe, looking for any unusual activity.

Hours pass, but it's not boredom that grips me, it's anticipation. Every shadow, every flicker of light behind her curtains puts my senses on high alert. The world narrows to this one apartment, this one woman, and the intricate web of secrets surrounding her.

The front door eventually opens. Valentina steps out, clad in an overcoat, her face hidden under the hood. She's not alone. Ilya is with her, the boy bundled up in a thick winter parka. Their conversation is too low for me to pick up, but Valentina's body language speaks volumes. She seems tense, occasionally glancing around as if wary of being watched.

This changes things. I need to be cautious. Confronting her directly might be risky, especially if she truly is an integral part of the Chechen mob. I need more information, and for that, I have to watch, wait, and most importantly, listen.

As they leave her property, I discreetly follow. The weight of the situation, the gravity of my discoveries tonight, is heavy. But my resolve is unyielding. If Valentina is indeed the key to all of this, I intend to unlock every secret she holds. My world, one I've so carefully crafted, hinges on the answers she possesses. And I'll stop at nothing to find the truth.

Through the dim lighting of the streetlamps, I catch a silhouette of a young woman approaching them, perhaps the babysitter. Valentina's voice, soft and warm, reaches me. She's saying her goodbyes to Ilya, each word laced with maternal affection. The scene strikes an unexpected chord in me, making the confusion and the weight of suspicion even heavier.

There Ilya is. He's still just a little boy, clinging to his mother. I can see the unease in his tiny frame, his reluctance to

let her go. The sight of them, so genuine and tender, raises a storm of conflict inside me. Is it possible for someone to wear so many faces? The doting mother, the seductive lover, the potential enemy. But don't I wear just as many masks?

For a long moment, Valentina just holds Ilya, pressing soft kisses to his forehead. I can see the rise and fall of her shoulders, the way she closes her eyes for a few heartbeats, as if drawing strength from this brief moment with her son. The babysitter, a young woman with a gentle smile, waits patiently.

This isn't a façade. This is real. It's raw and it's vulnerable. This is a mother saying goodbye, possibly not knowing when she'll be back. It doesn't fit the image of a cold-blooded mob associate. But then again, isn't life often more complicated than the labels we put on it?

As Valentina finally hands over Ilya and starts walking away, a fresh wave of emotions sweeps over me. For a moment, I'm not Roman, the savvy businessman and territorial alpha. I'm just a man, seeing a side of someone he cares for, a side that challenges everything he thought he knew.

But as she disappears from my line of sight, the reality of my world crashes back in. The intrigue, the danger, it's all still there. The scene I've just witnessed doesn't change the facts, but it does deepen the enigma that is Valentina.

A growing part of me wants to believe she's more a victim of circumstances than a willing participant in the mob's dealings. But wishes and realities are often worlds apart. One thing's for sure: the stakes have changed, and I'm more determined than ever to unravel the mysteries she embodies. The next move is mine, and I need to play it smart. I guide my car back onto the street, following her from a distance. Behind me, I catch sight of Ilya and the babysitter going back into Valentina's apartment building.

My instincts have never steered me wrong, and tonight, they're screaming at me. Her figure is illuminated by the ambient glow of the streetlights, her purposeful strides evident even from a distance. I keep a good space between us,

ensuring I'm never too close to raise suspicion but close enough to maintain a visual. She walks for a long bit, turning here and there and heading towards the nearby business district. I watch as she slips what appears to be a small pill bottle out of her bag, giving it a look over before tucking it away.

On a sudden impulse, I dial her number, curious about her reaction. The rings seem endless until finally, her voice breaks through, "Hello?" Up ahead, I see her holding the phone to her ear.

"Valentina," I purr, trying to keep my tone casual, "it's Roman. I was thinking of you and wondering if you'd like to go out for drinks tonight. Perhaps too short of notice, but a guy can try, no?"

A slight pause, then, "Oh, Roman, I wish I could. I'm with some friends right now."

The lie is blatant, and it stings more than I anticipated. There she is, alone, walking into the Tsarina Palace Hotel, one of the city's most luxurious, and she's feeding me tales of fictional companions. I can't help but smirk at the irony—two can play this game of subterfuge.

"No worries at all," I say, my tone warm and understanding. "Perhaps another night sometime soon."

"I'd like that."

We say our goodbyes and hang up.

I'm drawn to the Tsarina Palace Hotel like a moth to flame. Its stature dominates the skyline, representing a blend of grandeur and history. Watching Valentina's heels click against the pavement, I note the purpose in her stride and the way the evening lights play on her silhouette. Every now and then, she sneaks a glance into her purse, and I wonder about the distinct pill bottle shape. What's she hiding?

Decision made, I park and step out of the car, adjusting my jacket and ensuring I blend in with the upscale crowd inside the hotel. I've frequented this place enough times to know my

way around, but tonight it feels different—more clandestine, the stakes infinitely higher.

Following at a safe distance, I watch her traverse the lavish lobby, her heels clicking on the marbled floor. Her entire demeanor screams confidence, but her frequent checks of the pill bottle betray something else. Anxiety? Fear?

As she makes her way up the grand central staircase in the lobby, I realize exactly where she's heading: The 'Imperial Vista'. I've been to this VIP bar before. Its exclusivity is legendary. I follow her from a distance, watching as she steps through the tall, oak doors and vanishes. I give her a few moments, then follow.

Approaching the entrance, a beefy bouncer in a tailored suit sizes me up. "Evening," I greet, infusing my tone with the familiar charm that's never failed me.

He arches an eyebrow. "Invitation?"

With a smirk, I retort, "Guess I left it with my other suit. But trust me, someone in there is eagerly awaiting my presence." Subtly, I slip him a hefty tip. His hesitation is brief, then he nods, letting me through.

"Enjoy your evening, sir."

Stepping into Imperial Vista is like entering another world. Plush velvet drapes hang from the ceiling to the floor, hugging the expansive windows that reveal St. Petersburg in all its glowing beauty. Everywhere I look, there's glitter – from the chandeliers overhead to the crystal glasses clinking at the bar. Gold details adorn every conceivable corner, and the marble floor feels cool beneath my shoes.

The ambiance is thick with luxury. Soft jazz flows through the air, weaving seamlessly with the murmur of hushed conversations. Every aroma is intoxicating – the sharp tang of whiskey, the delicate notes of high-end perfumes.

As I survey the room, it's not the rich and powerful of St. Petersburg who catch my attention, only Valentina. There she is, back to me, her posture tense. A million questions race through my mind. Why is she here? And with whom?

But this isn't the time for confrontation. I settle into a shadowed corner, keeping her in my sight but far enough to remain unnoticed. The game is afoot, and I'm eager to play.

## CHAPTER 16

The plushness of the Imperial Vista surrounds me, but I only have eyes for one figure. At the bar, standing taller than most, is Paul Rutherford, the man I've been waiting for. His hair, sleek and impeccably styled, gleams under the chandeliers. It's unmistakably slicked-back in the familiar British way. He's garbed in a suit that screams Savile Row, and even from here, the crisp accent of his voice reaches my ears. Every detail about him resonates with English sophistication.

But to me, he's just the next name on my list. And little does he know, a walking corpse.

My eyes swiftly map out the bar, catching the intricacies of the environment. The quiet conversations, the clinking of glasses, the undercurrents of the night – all familiar. In this world of rhythms and patterns, I already see the gaps, the openings. My plan forms rapidly.

Masquerading as one of the staff will get me closest to him. I've always believed in the power of blending in, of becoming just another face in the crowd. Now, all I have to do is execute my plan.

I rise, moving with purpose towards the staff-only section, each step echoing my determination. Confidence is my armor as I stride into the staff room, ensuring no one questions my presence.

A dim bulb lights the room, the air redolent of cleaning agents. The distant chatter from the men's section gives me

pause, but luck is on my side – the women’s section is empty. My eyes immediately find the lockers. They’re my best bet. I begin my search, pulling gently at each handle, seeking an unlocked treasure. On my fifth try, the door swings open to reveal a pristine hotel uniform.

I shed my outfit, slipping into the crisp white costume. The shirt feels snug against my chest, but the black skirt is a perfect fit. When I’m dressed, I quickly roll my street clothes and tuck them into my bag. Then I take a moment, turning to the locker’s inbuilt mirror. The transformation isn’t complete. My hairstyle would give me away in an instant.

I work quickly, letting down my waves and pulling them back into a tight, professional bun. Next, my makeup. Gone are the smoky eyes, replaced with a subtle, more demure look. A bit of mascara, a hint of blush, and the transformation feels almost uncanny. The name embroidered on the shirt catches my eye. “Elena,” it reads. For tonight, Valentina is gone, replaced by Elena, the bartender.

Stepping out, there’s a rush, a thrill. It’s this high, the dance of danger and disguise, that’s always pulled me to this life. I move towards the bar, sticking to the periphery, praying that in this sea of faces, mine is just another ripple – the staff is large enough that my presence doesn’t attract attention. Especially to the British gentleman who’s about to have his evening turned upside down.

Despite my attire, my confidence, and my calculated moves, a part of me is always acutely aware of the risks. One wrong move, one familiar face, and the jig would be up. But then, that’s the nature of my job, isn’t it? Every step is a dance on a tightrope, and I’ve never fallen off.

The ambient music of the bar, the gentle hum of conversations, all fades into the background. All I can hear is the steady beat of my heart, the soft whisper of my breath. Every sense is heightened, every nerve is alive. The distance between the target and me decreases with each step. As the plush rugs of the Imperial Vista cushion my steps, I feel the weight of the mission bearing down on me, but also the thrill of the chase.

The man at the bar remains oblivious, lost in his world, sipping his drink, unaware the night holds a twist he couldn't possibly anticipate. As I move closer, the air grows thick with tension, but my determination never wavers.

Elena is ready to play her part. The night at the Imperial Vista is just beginning, and the Ghost is in control.

Taking a deep breath, I stroll towards the bar, stepping into my role with practiced ease. I've always been good at playing a part, at slipping into another skin and making it believable. As I reach the bar, I clear my throat and give the man a bright, professional smile.

"Good evening, sir. May I interest you in one of our special cocktails?" I say, laying the charm on just thick enough. I need him comfortable, trusting.

He turns, his keen gaze assessing me for a moment. His lips curl into a smug smile, his pride evident. "Certainly. Surprise me," he replies, his accent thicker than cream.

I chuckle softly, as any good bartender would. "I hope you have a taste for adventure, then."

"As long as it comes with a good drink," he quips with a smile, his eyes lingering on mine a second longer than necessary.

I suppress a shiver. No matter how many times I do this, there's always a spark of adrenaline when the moment comes.

"Tell me," he continues, leaning in, "what's the most exotic thing you've got?"

Deciding to play along, I reply, "Well, sir, we have a blend that combines Russian and British tastes. Vodka with a hint of elderflower. Would that be to your liking?"

His face lights up with intrigue. "A fusion of our two worlds? I'd love to try."

Perfect. I reach below the counter, grabbing a bottle of vodka and another of elderflower liqueur. As I start making the drink, I keep up the small talk. "Visiting St. Petersburg for business or pleasure?"

“A bit of both,” he answers, sipping the remnants of his previous drink, his eyes never leaving mine. “There’s always something to be done, and if one can enjoy the beauty of the city in the process, why not?”

My fingers wrap around the tiny pill bottle hidden in my pocket. I subtly drop the pill into the drink, watching it dissolve quickly. I stir the cocktail to be sure it’s perfectly blended.

“And here you are, sir,” I say, handing the drink to the unsuspecting man.

“Looks lovely.” Rutherford raises the drink into the air. “Cheers.” I nod at him, a tingle running up my spine as he prepares to take the deadly sip.

Just one more moment and...

Out of nowhere, a man bumps hard into Rutherford, the impact knocking the drink out of his grasp. The cocktail splatters across the bar, its intended effect lost forever. The guests around are taken aback, and I quickly go to work cleaning up. Heart pounding, I turn my attention to the man who bumped into Rutherford, and the breath catches in my throat.

Roman.

“Clumsy of me,” he says, his eyes locked onto mine, a hint of warning, or perhaps challenge, evident in them.

Feigning surprise and annoyance, I shoot back, “What are you doing? Don’t you know how to walk?”

“God, what a klutz I can be,” Roman responds, his voice smooth as ever.

I turn to Rutherford, who is now visibly annoyed. “I’m so sorry, sir. Let me make you another one. On the house.” The poison is ruined – now the game is about preserving my cover.

Roman extends a hand toward the British man, his voice dripping with remorse. “Sir, I’m truly sorry for the incident. It

was absolute carelessness on my part.” He speaks flawless English, nearly as good as mine.

The Brit scoffs, his annoyance clear. “Perhaps in the future, you’ll watch where you step.” He snorts, shaking his head. “I suppose this is as good a sign as any to turn in for the night.”

He doesn’t even wait for a response, simply grabbing his coat and leaving the bar. I watch helplessly as my quarry departs, my carefully laid plan in ruins.

I turn my attention back to Roman, and his eyes, darkened with a mix of emotions, bore into mine. My heart pounds furiously in my chest. He’s seen me, truly seen me for the first time. And from the look on his face, there’s no doubt in my mind he’s pieced things together.

But what truly unnerves me is the evident disappointment in his gaze, a gentle, almost pleading questioning of why? Yet, there’s something else lurking in the depths of his blue eyes, a fiery intensity that belies a more primal reaction.

“You know,” he murmurs, leaning in so his lips hover close to my ear, “You’ve always been a mystery to me, Valentina. But I never imagined...”

I cut him off, my voice sharp with the rising panic I feel. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He takes a moment to study me, and the space between us is charged with a tension that feels palpable. Without any warning, he chuckles, a low, deep sound that sends shivers down my spine.

“I must admit,” he confesses, “there’s something incredibly seductive about danger. And you? You might just be the most dangerous woman I’ve ever met.”

I blink, processing his words. Is he seriously flirting with me now, after potentially discovering my most guarded secret? “Are you seriously telling me you find this situation... arousing?”

He grins, and the way he looks at me causes heat to rise in my cheeks. “The thrill of the chase, the forbidden, the

danger... I'd be lying if I said it didn't intrigue me."

It's a surreal moment, standing in the middle of the exquisite bar with the panorama of St. Petersburg glittering beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows. The decadence of the room—gold leaf details, plush velvet seats, the scent of exotic woods mixed with the smoky aroma of premium liquors—contrasts sharply with the intensity of our conversation.

"You have no idea what you're getting into," I finally mutter, pulling away from him slightly.

His eyes never leave mine. "But I want to. I want to understand, Valentina. Every part of you."

I turn around, my heels clicking on the pristine marble floors as I head for the exit. I've been exposed, or at least I feel like I have been, and all I want is to retreat, to escape from Roman's penetrating gaze. But I've barely gone a few paces down the hallway beyond the bar when a firm hand wraps around my wrist, yanking me to the side.

Suddenly, I'm pulled into the dimness of a nearby supply closet. The door clicks shut behind us, leaving us ensconced in a cocoon of shadows, the only light filtering in from the crack beneath the door. Roman's tall frame looms over me, and his eyes, still filled with a mix of anger and passion, are inches from mine.

"What was that, Valentina? Who was that man? And what were you doing with that drink?" His voice is low and dangerous, but also tinged with desperation, eager for me to give him an explanation.

"I don't owe you any explanations," I hiss, defiance burning in my eyes. It's a defense mechanism, one that has kept me safe for years.

Roman's grip tightens on my arm, not enough to hurt but enough to make a point. "Damn it, Valentina! I've seen enough movies to know when someone's trying to poison another. Why? Who is he to you?"

I grit my teeth, battling with the storm of emotions inside me. How could things have unraveled so quickly? "It's not

your business.”

He takes a step closer, our bodies almost touching, and the intensity of his presence makes it hard to breathe. “Everything about you is my business. The moment you stepped into my life, it became my business. I won’t let you shut me out.”

Our faces are inches apart, our breaths mingling in the tight space. I’m acutely aware of the heat radiating off him, and the anger and frustration are nearly palpable between us. “You think you have a right to my secrets, to my life? Just because we’ve shared a few nights together?” I retort, my voice quivering.

The silence stretches between us, filled only by our ragged breathing. Without warning, Roman’s lips crash down onto mine. The kiss is fierce, desperate, as if he’s trying to draw the truth out of me, and despite the war raging inside my head, I respond with equal fervor. Our mouths move in sync, teeth clashing, tongues battling for dominance.

The hotel and all its opulence fade, and there’s nothing but us, the fire of our emotions consuming everything else. My fingers tangle in his hair, pulling him closer, even as my mind screams at me to pull away. It’s a dangerous game, this dance of passion and secrets, and as the heat rises, it becomes harder to distinguish where the anger ends and the desire begins.

## CHAPTER 17

## VALENTINA

In the dimly lit supply closet, the tension is practically tangible, every touch amplified. Roman's hands find the small of my back, pulling me tightly against him, while mine glide up, tracing the muscles of his chest through his dress shirt. The soft rustle of fabric fills the small space as our mouths continue their frenzied dance.

Every inch of my mind screams at me to pull away, to remember the risks, the complications of letting things go too far. But with Roman, there's always been this electric charge, a magnetism drawing me to him. Even in the face of danger, his very presence makes me want to live in the moment, to forget about the world outside.

His fingers trace my spine, sending a shiver through my entire body. The sensation is heightened by the confined space and the forbidden nature of our rendezvous. "Valentina," he murmurs against my lips, the sound of my name making my heart skip a beat.

I lean back slightly, my hands flat against his chest. We're both breathing heavily, the weight of our mutual desires evident. "Roman, we shouldn't—" I start, but he cuts me off with a wicked grin.

"Shouldn't what? Want each other so desperately?" His fingers brush against my cheek, his touch feather light. "You're telling me you don't feel the fire between us?"

The boldness in his eyes challenges me, and I can't help but tell the truth. "Oh, I feel it," I retort, biting my lip for

effect. “Then again, perhaps it’s just your overinflated ego playing tricks on you.”

He chuckles, the sound deep and rich. “You always have an answer, don’t you?” His hand shifts down, and he presses himself against me, letting me feel the evidence of his desire. “Does that feel like an illusion to you?”

I gulp, my earlier bravado momentarily evaporating. The closeness, the intensity of our proximity, threatens to drown all logical thought. “Your arrogance is quite astounding.”

“And your ability to resist me is impressive,” he quips, his gaze fixed on my lips.

The playful banter, the teasing, it’s all a way of navigating this treacherous territory we’ve found ourselves in. We’re both well aware of the dangers, but there’s a thrill in dancing on the edge, in pushing boundaries.

Our mouths meet again, more urgently this time. The world outside fades, the noise, the dangers, everything becomes background noise. For now, it’s just the two of us, tangled in a world of our own making, fueled by raw passion and unsaid words. Every brush of skin, every stolen touch, speaks volumes more than any conversation ever could.

In the close confines of the supply closet, the atmosphere thickens with raw tension and pent-up desire. The space is cramped, the air hot and heady with the scent of our mingling colognes. Roman’s hands move with a sense of urgency, hiking up my skirt, exposing the smooth skin of my thighs to the cold air. My breath catches, a shiver of anticipation running down my spine. He slips his fingers underneath the waistband of my panties, pulling them down to my knees.

His fingers are rough but gentle, tracing patterns on my flesh, sending electric shocks of pleasure through me. I feel his breath on the back of my neck, hot and ragged. He turns me around with a firm grip; the command in the move makes me crazy, pushing me against the wooden wall of the closet. The rough texture grazes my skin, but it’s the least of my concerns. All I can think of is him and the way he’s looking at me.

He's got me pinned against the wall in just the way I want. He takes hold of his cock, pressing it against my pussy. I'm so wet that he glides inside with ease, his front pressing against my ass, his thickness stretching me out in a way that's by now deliciously familiar. I moan, splaying my palms against the cool wall of the supply closet, my nails pressing against them as he fills me completely.

My moans fill the tiny space, each one escaping my lips with every deft movement of his hands, every whispered promise. His hands on my hips, he drives into me again and again and again, the pleasure building so quickly I can scarcely wrap my head around it.

Roman's mouth finds my neck, his teeth grazing the sensitive skin there. The sensation has me biting my lower lip, trying to suppress the loud moans threatening to escape. He pulls me closer, my back arching instinctively against him, our bodies moving in a rhythm as old as time. Even through the layers of our clothes, the heat between us is unmistakable. I can feel the orgasm building, the pleasure blending with the adrenaline still remaining in my body from the near-kill.

The reality of our situation, the audacity of our actions, only heightens the thrill. Every stolen touch, every shared secret look, has been leading to this moment. The boundaries we once adhered to are obliterated, replaced by pure, unadulterated need.

His grip tightens on my waist, pulling me even closer, and I can feel the hard evidence of his desire deep inside me. My head tilts back, a soft moan escaping my lips as his name becomes a whispered prayer.

The tension builds, coiling tightly within us, and I can sense we're both on the edge. We move together, two souls lost in a moment of passion and shared longing. Every touch, every whispered word pushes us closer and closer until we both find that sweet release, a crescendo of shared pleasure that leaves us breathless and spent. His warmth fills me, soon dripping down my inner thigh. God, how good it feels.

For a moment, we just stand there, leaning against one another, the weight of our actions slowly sinking in. We've crossed a line, and there's no turning back now.

One thought fills my head as the pleasure ebbs – I need to leave.

I pull my panties back up and adjust myself as quickly as possible, doing my best to not look like I've just been screwed in a supply closet.

“You alright?” Roman asks as he tucks his shirt back in.

Without a word, I'm gone. I hurry out of the closet and rush down the hall, making my way into the lobby and towards the grand front entrance of the hotel. I glance over my shoulder and, sure enough, Roman is hurrying after me.

I ignore him as I step outside, the night air cool against my flushed skin. My footsteps, quick and determined, echo on the sidewalk. I need to put distance between Roman and me, between temptation and duty.

But Roman isn't willing to let me slip away that easily.

“Valentina!” His voice, a mix of frustration and desperation, halts me in my tracks. He catches up to me, grabbing my arm. His fingers are warm.

I jerk away, the heat of anger burning through me. “What do you want?” My voice is sharp, cutting through the night.

“We need to talk,” he says, his face shadowed, eyes intense.

I don't need to talk. I need to leave, to disappear, to get as far away from him as possible. But for some reason, my feet remain planted to the ground.

“You don't understand what's happening here,” I snap. “You're playing in a game where you don't even know the rules.”

He steps closer, his cologne enveloping me. “Then tell me.”

I exhale, frustration bubbling up. “Fine. One conversation, then I’m gone.”

We find ourselves in a secluded corner park. The faint city glow illuminates the old benches and forgotten statues. It’s silent, save for the distant hum of the city and the gentle howl of the wind. This place is hidden, shielded from the prying eyes of the world, just like our secrets.

I turn to face him, gathering my courage. “The Chechen mob knows exactly who you are and why you’re in St. Petersburg.” I watch as his face turns from confusion to realization. “They’ve been watching you, Roman. They’re aware of every move you make.”

His voice comes out hoarse. “And you’re with them.”

I nod, the weight of my confession bearing down on me. “Yes. And they won’t hesitate to remove anyone in their way.”

His expression hardens. “Is that why you’ve been with me? To gather intel? Was this all a game to you?”

“No,” I respond, my voice quivering with sincerity. “That wasn’t the plan, but things... got complicated. It became personal.”

He scoffs, taking a step back. “So, now what? You’re here to finish the job?”

Tears prick my eyes, but I blink them back. “They’ve ordered your hit, Roman. If you don’t leave St. Petersburg by dawn, you won’t see another sunrise. And the worst part?” I take a shaky breath. “They want me to do it.”

His face pales, the gravity of the situation sinking in. “Why are you telling me this?”

I look away, searching for the right words. “Because despite everything, I can’t do it. I can’t hurt you. But if you stay, I won’t have a choice.”

A tense silence engulfs us, the weight of our shared secrets pressing down on us. The reality is clear: two worlds, two allegiances, have collided, and there’s no easy way out.

I watch Roman's face as realization washes over him. The disbelief, confusion, and anguish are evident in his dark eyes. "They want you... Do you want to kill me?" he stammers, his usually composed demeanor crumbling.

His question makes my blood boil. "This isn't just about you," I snap. My voice is laced with bitterness as memories from the past flood my mind. "You and your precious Russian Bratva are the reason Iosef is gone."

He looks confused. "Iosef?"

"Iosef Tolensky. How many men have you killed that you can't remember their names?" I spit. "Because I can tell you every single one I've sent to the grave. Iosef was my fiancé. He was everything to me. And he's dead because of you and your people."

Roman's voice cracks, "I've never harmed anyone who didn't deserve it, Valentina. I didn't know about Iosef."

But I can't listen. The pain, raw and searing, takes over. "You think that makes it okay? That ignorance absolves you?"

There's a heaviness in his gaze. "Val, I didn't..."

"Don't call me that," I interrupt. My voice wavers with suppressed anger. "You haven't earned that right."

Silence hangs between us. The intensity of our exchange has left us both emotionally drained. His face is a storm of emotions: regret, confusion, desire. But his next question stops me cold.

"Why haven't you killed me already? If you hate me so much, why didn't you kill me the first night when you had the chance?"

It's a question I've been asking myself. Why did I let my guard down? Why did I allow myself to be swayed by his charm? By his touch? It's clear there's something between us, a pull I can't deny. But it's a weakness, one I cannot afford.

"I should have," I murmur, avoiding his gaze. "But every time I tried, something stopped me."

He steps closer, the distance between us narrowing. “Is it because you have feelings for me?”

I shove him away, the force of my push sending him stumbling back a few steps. His audacity astounds me. “You’re mistaken if you think there’s anything between us beyond a physical connection.”

“But Valentina...”

I cut him off with a sharp gesture. “No, Roman. Don’t delude yourself. You’re a loose end I haven’t tied up yet. And if you value your life, you’ll leave St. Petersburg. Because the next time we cross paths, I won’t be as forgiving.”

I turn on my heels and stride away. My heart pounds so loudly in my chest it drowns out the distant sounds of the city. Every step takes me further from Roman, from the complications, from the undeniable feelings I refuse to acknowledge.

But as the distance grows, one undeniable fact remains: things between Roman and me are far from over.

## CHAPTER 18

## ROMAN

The weight of the evening's revelation presses heavily on me as I weave my way through the dim streets of St. Petersburg. A cool wind, heavy with the scent of the Neva River, brushes against my face, but I barely notice. My mind races, replaying the confrontation with Valentina over and over.

My apartment's heavy wooden door is a welcome barrier between me and the city outside. As I turn the key in the lock, the familiar sound provides a momentary sense of safety, but I'm under no illusion that I'm safe here. Or anywhere, for that matter. I'm a marked man, a fact Valentina has made painfully clear.

I slip out of my coat, letting it fall onto a nearby chair and head straight to the minibar. A glass of the strongest whiskey soon sits heavy in my hand, and I knock it back, the burn doing little to distract me from the turmoil inside. The amber liquid is both a balm and a blade, calming yet sharpening my senses. I set the glass down with a thud, drawing in a shaky breath.

Iosef Tolensky. The name gnaws at the edges of my mind, a splinter I can't ignore. Valentina said it with such conviction, such pain. But who the hell is he? I've done many things in my life, crossed paths with countless souls, but this name...it doesn't resonate. I can't recall any connection to him.

I boot up my computer, the screen illuminating the dark room with a soft blue glow. My fingers fly over the keyboard as I pull up my personal database. Years of intelligence,

names, faces, operations—all stored meticulously. If Iosef Tolensky was someone I had dealings with, he would be in here.

Search after search yields no results. It's like searching for a ghost. No records, no images, not even a footnote of his existence in my world. Frustration builds inside me. If Valentina blames me for the death of someone who doesn't even appear in my records, then there's a piece of the puzzle I'm missing.

A sip of whiskey steadies my hand as I consider my next move. My contacts. Maybe they have information on this mysterious Iosef Tolensky. But contacting them brings its own set of risks. With the Chechen mob, and now Valentina, gunning for me, it's a dangerous game to play.

As the hours bleed away, I'm no closer to any answers. The room feels stifling, the weight of my situation suffocating. I push away from the desk, rubbing the tension from my temples.

A photograph on the bookshelf catches my eye. It's of my brothers and me, all of us together when we were younger before life became so complicated – the sole sentimental object in the apartment. My reasons for being in St. Petersburg, for everything I've done, all come back to them. And as I stare at their faces, a determination settles over me.

The dim light of my apartment feels like a cocoon, separating me from the dangers outside. I run a hand through my hair, inhaling deeply as the weight of the evening's events bears down on me. Every fiber of my being aches to hear Valentina's voice, to understand why she's been toying with me, but first, I need to learn more about Iosef.

Reaching for my phone, I dial Andrei's number. It's late, but I know he'll pick up. He always does.

“Roman?” His voice is tired but alert.

“Andrei, I need a favor. I need you to dig up all you can on someone named Iosef Tolensky. He's connected somehow to the Chechens here.”

A pause. “Why?”

I hesitate for a moment. Sharing everything with Andrei means baring the most vulnerable parts of myself. “I’m not ready to go into details yet.”

He lets out an exasperated sigh. “You’re always so damn secretive. Fine, I’ll help. But you better fill me in soon.”

“I promise. As soon as I have all the pieces,” I reply, gratitude warming my chest.

We hang up, and I find myself alone again with my swirling thoughts. Every memory of Valentina flashes before me – our intimate moments, our playful banter, the undeniable spark between us. Was it all an act? The pain of that possibility stings like a fresh wound.

But the logical part of me wrestles with the emotional part. If Valentina truly wanted me dead, she’s had ample opportunities. We’ve been close, alone, vulnerable. Yet she never took the final step. Was she gathering information? No, that doesn’t fit either. Our conversations were light, personal, never probing into the depths of the Bratva or my family’s dealings.

And the attraction...that was undeniable. It wasn’t just physical, but emotional. Our souls connected in a way that’s hard to fake. The way she looked at me, touched me, spoke to me – it was genuine. I can’t be wrong about that.

The realization hits me like a ton of bricks. Valentina may be an enigma, but I refuse to believe she’s a heartless killer. There’s something more at play here, something deeper than revenge.

Frustration gnaws at me as I try calling her. Predictably, it goes to voicemail. I imagine her looking at her phone, seeing my name, and purposely ignoring it. The thought angers me, but it also fuels my determination.

I won’t be pushed out of St. Petersburg. I’m not one to run away from challenges, and I’m definitely not abandoning someone who’s inexplicably wound her way into my heart.

Valentina might be the most complex puzzle I've ever encountered, but I'm determined to solve it.

Leaning back on the couch, I plot my next move. Valentina is an expert at staying off the radar, so finding her won't be easy. But I have resources, connections, and a burning desire to get to the truth. I'm not above using the Bratva's vast network to track her down, but I know it's going to take more than manpower. It's going to take wit, cunning, and maybe even a little charm.

I smile to myself. Challenge accepted.



The glittering chandeliers and plush decor of The Empyrean Hotel loom before me as I stride in. It's a place I've been to several times, both for business and pleasure, and the staff recognizes me immediately. My gaze narrows in on the front desk, where a striking receptionist with honey-blond hair is typing away. I've always believed a bit of charm can open more doors than threats, so I decide to work my magic.

"Good evening," I purr, leaning casually against the desk. "Looking radiant as always, Miss Elizaveta."

She looks up, startled, and then her face breaks into a broad smile. "Roman! It's been ages. What brings you here?"

"I wish it were pleasure," I reply, flashing her a sly grin. "But alas, I'm here on business."

She rolls her eyes playfully. "Always so busy. Tell me, what can I do for you?"

"I'm looking for a gentleman," I say smoothly. "Goes by the name of Paul Rutherford. I believe he's a guest here."

Paul had been at the Grand Tsarina the night before, but my tailing efforts of the evening revealed he'd changed locations. Had he suspected something with the strange encounter between myself, him, and Valentina the night before? Or was it a simple desire for a change of scenery? No way to know.

Elizaveta raises an eyebrow. “Are you sure you’re not here to see me?”

I chuckle. “As much as I’d *love* to wine and dine you, Elizaveta, tonight is about Mr. Rutherford. Do you know if he’s in?”

She feigns a sigh of disappointment. “Your loss. But I might have seen him. Word is, he headed out to dine at La Lumière. Swanky place.”

“You’re a lifesaver,” I tell her, leaning over to plant a soft, teasing kiss on her cheek. “Owe you one.”

Her eyes twinkle with mischief. “I’ll remember that.”

Wasting no time, I head to La Lumière, a high-end restaurant known for its ambiance and exclusivity. Spotting Paul is easy. The tall Brit with slicked-back hair is engrossed in a conversation at the bar, a wine glass in hand. I take a deep breath and approach him, steeling myself for the confrontation.

“Mr. Rutherford,” I begin, trying to sound as non-threatening as possible.

He looks up, his sharp eyes studying me with suspicion. “You! The clumsy oaf from the bar. What do you want?”

I decide to be blunt. “Your life is in danger.”

He laughs derisively. “Is this some kind of joke?”

“Far from it,” I reply, my tone serious. “You were almost poisoned last night. The Chechen mob has a score to settle with you.”

His eyes widen momentarily, but he quickly composes himself. “Ridiculous. Why would they want me dead?”

“That’s not my concern,” I say flatly. “All I know is they do. And they won’t stop until the job is done.”

He scrutinizes me for a moment, skepticism evident in his gaze. “Why should I believe you?”

“Because I saved your life last night. That drink? It was laced. And the woman who tried to serve it to you? She’s a

professional.”

Rutherford looks taken aback. “The stunning brunette? No way.”

I nod grimly. “She’s with them.”

He appears thoughtful for a moment, then shakes his head. “Even if that’s true, I fail to see why you’re helping me.”

“Let’s just say we have a common interest,” I reply cryptically.

He raises an eyebrow but doesn’t press further. Instead, he sighs heavily, running a hand through his hair. “Fine. What do you suggest I do?”

I lean in, speaking low. “Leave town. Now. The longer you stay, the more danger you’re in.”

He seems to weigh his options for a moment, then nods begrudgingly. “Alright. But if this is some trick...”

I cut him off, my tone hardening. “I have no reason to trick you, Rutherford. Just stay safe.”

Another few beats of silence pass as he regards me with skepticism. “Very well.” He reaches in his pocket and withdraws his wallet, taking out some cash and setting it on the bar. “But if this is some kind of...”

Suddenly, he looks confused, as if he’s caught sight of something. Then his hand goes to his throat, rubbing it gently like there’s some itch deep inside he’s trying to reach. Then he coughs. At first, it seems like nothing – just a man clearing his throat. He takes a sip of his water, his face contorting slightly. The coughing grows more persistent, intensifying in urgency. Each hack sounds strained, raspy, as if something is lodged in his throat.

“Are you okay?” a concerned voice asks from behind the bar.

Paul’s face pales, his fingers clutching the edge of the bar. His eyes are wide, pupils dilated in panic. He tries to speak, to call out, but no words come out, only a desperate wheezing.

His arm jerks forward, hitting his glass of wine and sending it to the floor with a crash.

Realization strikes me like a bolt of lightning. Poison. It has to be. I'd seen it before, the way a man's body rebels when a foreign substance courses through it, shutting down systems one by one. This is no allergic reaction or a mere piece of food gone down the wrong pipe. This is an assassination in progress.

Around us, the diners are becoming increasingly alarmed. People jump up from their seats, some trying to help, others merely watching in horror. A woman screams for someone to call an ambulance.

The weight of realization hits me as Paul Rutherford begins to convulse, his face turning an alarming shade of blue. The world goes into slow motion. I back away from him slowly, knowing there's nothing I can do. Patrons swarm around him, each trying to figure out what the hell is going on. The last thing I see before the crowd blocks my vision is the light fading from Paul's eyes.

The raucous sounds of the restaurant dim to a muted drone as I scan the room, a sense of dread gnawing at my gut. My eyes dart to the kitchen, catching a glimpse of a familiar silhouette, framed by the golden light – Valentina.

I see her, garbed in a chef's outfit, peering out. Our eyes lock, and there's an undeniable thrill, a cat-and-mouse game between two seasoned hunters. She retreats, and the chase is on.

Bolting from the restaurant, I rush through the lobby and to the side alley where the service entrance likely is. Sure enough, Valentina explodes from one of the steel side doors, already in the process of shucking off her chef's garb. She passes a dumpster, smoothly opening the top and depositing the clothing within.

Valentina is fast, her movements fluid as she darts between passersby and jumps over obstacles. The cold Russian air burns in my lungs as I run, my senses hyper-focused on her.

The winding streets of St. Petersburg, with their baroque architecture and canals, are a maze, but I manage to keep pace. I quickly gain ground, pushing past my limits. Ahead, Valentina ducks into another alley, the echo of her footsteps bouncing off the cobbled stone.

As I round the corner, a gun is thrust into my face, its barrel gleaming in the dim light. Valentina's eyes are cold, a mask of professional detachment, but there's a hint of emotion beneath – uncertainty, maybe even regret.

I freeze. The tables have turned. The predator has become the prey. But, being who I am, I don't easily succumb to fear. In one fluid motion, I draw my own gun, leveling it at her. The standoff is electric, our breathing heavy and ragged.

The wind blows between us, carrying the intoxicating scent of her mixed with the cool brine of the Baltic Sea. Her hair flutters, wild and untamed, her eyes darting between mine and the gun pointed at her. For a split second, the reality of our situation becomes all too clear: two lovers, guns drawn, with the weight of our worlds bearing down on us.

“Drop it, Valentina,” I growl, but there's a tremor in my voice I can't hide. Not from her. Not from someone who's seen right through me.

Her lips quirk up in a smirk. “You first.”

## CHAPTER 19

VALENTINA

I level my gun at him, every muscle in my body taut. My eyes glare into his, scanning for any signs of deception. “I told you to leave,” I hiss through gritted teeth, feeling the weight of the cold metal in my grip.

Roman, his usual confident, cocky demeanor replaced with an intensity that matches mine, keeps his gun trained on me as well. “I’m not going anywhere,” he says defiantly, his voice unwavering. “Not without answers.”

“The answers will get you killed.”

He tilts his head slightly, a glimmer of arrogant charm sneaking through. “If you really wanted to kill me, you would’ve done it already. Besides,” he pauses, the air between us charged, “I want you to know my family and I had nothing to do with Iosef’s death.”

My blood runs cold at the mention of Iosef’s name leaving his lips. “Don’t,” I warn him. “Don’t say his name.”

“But you need to understand, Valentina. Whatever evidence you think you have linking us to that tragedy... It’s not true. We don’t order hits. Someone’s trying to play both of us.”

My heart beats erratically. The grief is a tangible thing, a sharp pain in my chest. And all the clues pointed to the Antonov-Nicolaevich Bratva, specifically to Roman.

“You expect me to believe you?” I spit out, trying to keep my voice steady. “With evidence directly linking your family to the murder?”

Roman's gaze never wavers. "It was planted. Someone wants us at odds. We're being played, Valentina. My brothers are looking into it as we speak. I'll have answers soon."

The anger in me wants to reject him, to label him a liar, to pull the trigger. But as I search his face, those piercing green eyes hold nothing but raw honesty. Doubt seeps in, mingling with my rage. I'm torn, my feelings for him warring with the reality I've come to believe.

He takes a step closer, lowering his gun slightly. "Let's find out the truth together," he urges softly, sincerity dripping from every word.

As much as I want to tell him he's full of shit, a part of me wants to believe him. The heartache, the feeling of betrayal, the burning desire for revenge, all of it swirls into a tempestuous storm within me. He's offering me an olive branch, a chance at answers, perhaps even redemption. But can I trust him?

"I don't know what to think anymore," I admit, my voice barely above a whisper, my gun lowering as doubt continues to plague my mind. The standoff has shifted, no longer just a physical one, but a battle of trust and truth.

The chilly night air becomes charged with tension as Roman slowly places his gun back in his waistband. His gaze never leaves mine, his face lit by the ambient glow of the city lights. My fingers twitch around my weapon, indecision and a maelstrom of emotions making my hand shake.

"Pick it up," I order, my voice quivering. The weight of our past, of the truths and lies hanging between us, feels like a physical barrier.

He raises an eyebrow, a glint of challenge in his eyes. "If you're so convinced of your hatred, if you truly believe I'm the enemy," he murmurs, "take your shot. Here I am."

My breathing becomes ragged. Anger, pain, and confusion course through me, but beneath it all is the undeniable pull I feel towards him. The hurt he may have caused is real, but so is the connection between us, and that's what makes it so

maddening. My finger hovers over the trigger, but deep down, I know I can't do it. I can't shoot the man who, in spite of everything, has come to mean so much to me.

Recognizing my hesitation, Roman takes a step forward. My instincts scream at me, torn between running and staying put. Another step, and he's close enough for me to feel the warmth emanating from his body. "Valentina," he breathes, his voice rough with emotion.

With a sudden, swift move, he pulls the gun from my hand and tosses it aside. It clatters on the cobblestone, echoing the frantic beating of my heart. Before I can react, he's on me, his hands cupping my face, pulling me into a kiss as fierce as it is tender.

Our lips meet in a maelstrom of passion and raw emotion. The world fades, leaving only the two of us and the intensity of our shared moment. His lips are demanding yet gentle, coaxing a response from me that I can't deny. My body betrays my anger and confusion, melting into him as if drawn by some inexorable force.

His fingers tangle in my hair, pulling me closer, deepening the kiss. The taste of him — a hint of the whiskey he'd drunk earlier mixed with the pure essence of Roman — is intoxicating. I respond with equal fervor, the heat between us undeniable and all-consuming. We're two souls clashing, finding solace in one another amidst a world of chaos and deception.

I clutch his coat, drawing him closer, our bodies pressing together as if trying to merge into one. Every touch, every movement is charged with a raw need, an urgency born of the realization that in this unpredictable world, this might be our last chance at finding truth among the lies.

When we finally part, gasping for breath, our foreheads rest together. His eyes, still dark with passion, search mine for answers. But for the moment, words are unnecessary. The kiss has spoken volumes, revealing a connection that runs deeper than any feud or misunderstanding. We're bound by an unspoken promise, a determination to find the truth.

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes, an odd blend of pain, confusion, and desperation blurring my vision. His words resonate within me, echoing my own turmoil. The passion we just shared feels like a promise, but the reality of our situation keeps its claws buried deep in my heart.

“I don’t know what to believe anymore, Roman,” I whisper, struggling to keep my voice steady. “I see sincerity in your eyes. I feel it every time we touch. But how do I reconcile that with everything I thought I knew?”

He steps closer, gently wiping away a tear that’s escaped, his touch sending a shiver down my spine. “I wish I had all the answers, Valentina,” he murmurs. “But the truth is, I’m as much in the dark as you are. All I know is what I feel, right here, right now.”

I search his face, trying to find any hint of deceit, but find none. Just raw emotion and vulnerability. It’s a side of him I’ve never seen before, and it throws me off balance.

“So what now?” I ask, my voice trembling.

Roman sighs deeply, looking skyward as if seeking guidance from the stars. “As much as it hurts me to say this,” he begins, “we need to stay apart for a while. Until I know exactly what is going on. As long as the Chechen mob is involved, it’s too risky.”

My heart clenches at the thought. After everything we’ve been through, the thought of being apart from Roman feels unbearable. But I know he’s right. The weight of our respective worlds is too great, and we risk being crushed under them.

“We’ll figure this out,” he promises, taking my hands in his. “Together. But for now, I need you to be safe. I need to know you’re out of harm’s way.”

Tears stream down my face as the weight of our situation hits me full force. “I don’t want to be your enemy, Roman,” I confess, my voice breaking.

His thumb strokes my cheek, his touch impossibly tender. “You never were, Valentina. And you never will be.”

He pulls me into a tight embrace, our bodies melding together one last time, seeking comfort and solace in each other's arms. After what feels like both an eternity and an instant, he pulls away slightly, lowering his lips to mine for one final, lingering kiss. It's a kiss full of promise, hope, and a silent vow to find our way back to each other.

As he pulls away, he touches my face one last time, his fingers trailing down my cheek. "I promise to stay in touch," he murmurs, his voice thick with emotion. "I'll find a way to get us out of this mess. Just... stay safe, okay?"

I nod, the lump in my throat making it impossible to speak. He gives me one last lingering look, his green eyes filled with pain and determination, before turning away and disappearing into the shadows of the St. Petersburg night. Left alone in the alley, I clutch my chest, feeling the raw, gaping wound left behind by his absence. But deep down, I hold on to hope. The connection between us is too strong to be broken. And I have to believe that, somehow, we'll find our way back to each other.

## CHAPTER 20

The high stone walls of the old cathedral echo with a somber silence that belies its history. Ornate, centuries-old frescoes look down upon the assembly like silent witnesses to the clandestine dealings of the Chechen mob. Heavy chandeliers dangle precariously, their candles casting eerie shadows onto the scene below. Abandoned by the faithful, it now serves a more sinister purpose. Tonight, it's the chosen venue for an emergency gathering with wooden pews replaced by a long, black oak table. Various gang members sit around it, the weight of the situation evident in their tense expressions.

The smell of stale incense hangs thick in the air, creating a grim atmosphere that seems to reinforce the urgency of this gathering. At the head of the table sits Vladimir, my older brother and the current head of the Chechen operations. He surveys the room with his steely blue eyes, waiting for everyone to settle down. The quiet murmur of hushed conversations dies down, replaced by a tense stillness. The weight of his gaze ensures no interruptions as he stands to address the room.

"Roman Nicolaevich," Vladimir begins, holding up a black and white photograph of the man I've come to know intimately, "poses a significant threat to our operations."

I grit my teeth, trying to keep my emotions in check. I'd hoped Roman would have flown under the radar for just a little longer. Yet here we are, discussing him as if he were some most-wanted criminal. I watch as the photograph circulates

among the members, each one studying it with grim determination.

Vladimir continues, “We have given him more leeway than we would anyone else, and he continues to interfere with our business.”

Clearing my throat, I interject, my voice strong and steady, even though I feel anything but. “He’s my mark. I’ve been working on it.”

Vladimir narrows his eyes at me. There’s a hard edge to his voice when he responds, “We’ve given you plenty of time to take him out, Valentina. Why hasn’t it been done?”

“These things take time,” I shoot back, trying not to let the frustration seep into my voice. Trying to maintain a cool, detached demeanor.

“We’re out of time!” Vladimir snaps, his patience visibly worn thin.

An uncomfortable hush settles over the room. I glance around, meeting the eyes of other members, trying to gauge their reactions. Most avoid my gaze, though a few offer me looks of sympathy. I don’t need their pity. I need time.

“The decision is final,” Vladimir continues, his tone allowing no room for debate. “If anyone sees him, kill him on sight.”

The gravity of the statement hangs heavy in the room.

As the meeting disperses, I struggle to maintain my composure. The stakes have never been higher. Each moment Roman remains in St. Petersburg, his life hangs by a thread. As the members filter out, their hushed voices a cacophony of conspiracies, I take a moment to absorb it all. The cathedral, with its grandeur and history, seems to mock me with its stoic silence.

Leaning against a pillar, I close my eyes, silently sending a desperate plea into the universe. *Please, Roman, keep yourself safe, just a little while longer.* The weight of my duty to the Chechens and my budding feelings for Roman clash inside me, creating a turmoil I’m not sure how to navigate.

But one thing's for sure. The clock is ticking, and I have to make a choice. One that will define the rest of my life.

The dim candles of the cathedral flicker as the members disperse, their conversations fading like ghosts into the night. With every step I take, the weight of the looming threat against Roman becomes more real. But first, I need clarity on a past that has haunted me for far too long.

Catching up to Vladimir, I touch his arm lightly, urging him to pause. His expression is one of mild irritation, the same one he used to give when we were kids and I had questions about everything.

"I... I have something strange to ask you."

He regards me with curiosity. "Strange? What is it?"

"It's about Iosef. What did he say to you the day before our wedding?" I ask, my voice betraying a hint of vulnerability I rarely show. "Do you remember anything unusual?"

Vladimir's brows furrow, and he looks down, thinking hard. "Iosef? He was excited. Why?"

"We were about to start our lives together," I say. "But... something feels off. I've been trying to piece it together. Did he ever mention anything to you? Cold feet, perhaps?"

Vladimir takes a moment before responding, looking genuinely perplexed. "He was a bit quiet, yes, but cold feet? No. I asked him about it. I was to be his best man, after all. He told me he couldn't wait to marry you. Why? What's this about?"

A flood of memories rushes back, each more piercing than the last. The days leading up to the wedding were a whirlwind of emotions. I recall sitting with Iosef in the park, watching the sunset, the hues of orange and pink reflecting our dreams and hopes. The cool breeze tousled his dark hair as he flashed me a smile that always made me weak at the knees.

During one of these evenings, I'd mustered the courage to tell him about the baby. The words hung between us like fragile glass ornaments, waiting for a reaction. Iosef's face went pale, and there was a silence that felt like eternity. But

then he looked up, his eyes glistening, and he seemed genuinely excited.

“We’re going to be parents,” he’d said, pulling me close and kissing my forehead. But even in that sweet moment, I’d caught a brief hesitation, a fleeting shadow across his eyes, a distant, troubled look he quickly brushed aside. I’d brushed it aside too, attributing it to the shock of the news.

Now, standing in the cathedral’s shadows, that look takes on a deeper significance.

“Valya?” Vladimir prompts, breaking my reverie.

“After I told him about the pregnancy, he... he was a bit strange. Just for a moment. I’d attributed it to the shock of the news, but now... now I wonder.”

Vladimir sighs, looking down at the intricate patterns of the stone floor. “He loved you, Valentina. He was looking forward to the future. Maybe he just needed a moment to let it sink in. Don’t torture yourself over it.”

I nod, though deep inside, a new seed of doubt has been planted. Could there have been something Iosef wasn’t telling me? Had he discovered something that put him in danger? My heart races, and a chilling thought crosses my mind: Was the news of our child tied to his death in some unimaginable way?

I need answers. And I’ll go to the ends of the earth to find them.

The soft hum of the city fades as I step into our apartment, my sanctuary, where every wall and nook seem to whisper memories of happier days. The wooden floors creak under my weight, each sound a stark reminder of the burden I now shoulder, not just for myself, but for my son.

The familiar scent of Ilya’s room greets me as I peek in. Toys litter the floor – his beloved stuffed bear Mikka, the collection of cars he insists on playing with before bedtime. Among the clutter, my son’s face lights up, radiant with the innocent joy only a child possesses.

“Mama! You’re back!” Ilya’s voice, bubbling with excitement, warms my heart. His dark hair, so reminiscent of

his father's, is a mess, and his deep blue eyes glisten with mischief. "Where's Roman? He promised we'd get ice cream. Chocolate and vanilla, remember?"

I crouch to meet his eyes, gently brushing a lock of hair from his face. Each glance at Ilya reveals echoes of Iosef, causing an ache in my chest. "Maybe in a little while, sweetie," I reply, praying he doesn't detect the tremor in my voice.

He tries to hide his disappointment, nodding earnestly. "Okay, Mama. Can we read a story?"

"Of course, my love," I say, reaching for his favorite book – a tale of a brave knight on a quest to find a lost dragon. As I begin, the words spin a web of fantasy around us, offering a brief escape from our harsh reality. The soft glow of his nightlight bathes the room in a warm hue, and for this fleeting moment, all feels right.

By the story's end, Ilya's eyelids droop with sleep. I plant a gentle kiss on his forehead. "Sweet dreams, my little knight," I say.

After ensuring he's snugly tucked in, I find solitude in my room, a wave of nausea sweeping over me. At first, it's nothing – a mere wave of unpleasantness that could almost certainly be attributed to the events of the evening.

But it doesn't go away. In fact, it gets worse. It's not long before I'm springing out of bed and rushing into the bathroom. I drop to my knees in front of the toilet and vomit. It doesn't take long before I've emptied my belly and am coughing with my arms wrapped around the porcelain.

It's nerves – has to be. I stay there for a moment before soon feeling like myself again. When I'm ready, I flush the toilet, wash out my mouth, and leave the restroom.

Drawing the curtains shut, I sit on the bed's edge. My head sinks into my hands, the weight of recent events pressing down on me. My very being feels stretched thin. The looming danger to Roman, the unsolved riddle of Iosef's demise, Ilya's well-being – all of it.

I lay down and close my eyes, letting the rhythmic beat of my heart and the city's distant murmurs lull me to sleep. Amid all the chaos, two things remain unshaken – my unwavering love for Ilya and the hope for brighter tomorrows. Challenges await with the dawn, but for tonight, I find solace in sleep's gentle embrace.

## CHAPTER 21

## VALENTINA

The next day I enter our base, an unassuming building in the heart of the city that hides our operations. The dim lighting casts the room in an amber hue. Men and women busy themselves with various tasks, but the air feels dense, charged with tension.

Before I can fully step in, Vladimir's booming voice breaks the silence, ripping through the usual murmurs. "Valentina!" he yells, signaling me to approach.

Our shared blood is the only thing that softens the sharpness of his anger. I hurry in the direction of his voice, making my way to his office and ignoring the curious stares of the men around me.

My brother is the picture of fury as I enter, standing behind his desk, leaning on his fists. Vladimir's anger is palpable, practically vibrating through the walls of his opulent office. The rich mahogany furniture, the plush carpeting, and the golden trinkets from around the world somehow amplify the tension in the room. He glares at me, full of accusation and fury.

"He's gone," Vladimir growls, taking a step around his desk. "Roman has fled St. Petersburg."

I'm momentarily taken aback, trying to summon a reaction suitable to the gravitas of this revelation. "What? How?" I demand, feigning shock. I try to keep my face neutral, not allowing any trace of my secret relief to show.

Vladimir slams a hand down on his desk, sending papers fluttering. “We had the advantage, the element of surprise. And now? Now he’s slipped right through our fingers!”

I bite the inside of my cheek, hoping to suppress the smirk threatening to break out. Good, I think. At least he’s safe. For now.

“It was your responsibility to handle him, Valentina. I trusted you!” Vladimir continues, his voice filled with venom. His piercing gaze meets mine, a storm raging in his eyes. “You promised he would be dealt with. You gave me your word. You said you’d handle Roman!” he snarls, his tone accusing.

I feel the sting of his words, but I won’t back down. “I was ready to handle it,” I shoot back, my tone just as fiery. “Someone must’ve tipped him off. Maybe if you didn’t have half the city in your pocket, we wouldn’t have leaks.”

His face contorts, a dangerous blend of rage and disbelief. “Don’t you dare imply my decisions compromised this mission!”

I fold my arms defiantly. “I’m saying you should’ve left it to me. But no, you think you can control every situation, every person, don’t you? Including me!”

His face reddens, veins bulging in his neck. “You think this is about control? Roman is a threat! And you, sleeping with him, getting all... emotional! Can you not see what you’re doing? Or who you’re risking?”

Our spat draws the attention of nearly everyone in the building. I feel their gazes on us, but at this moment, all that matters is the growing chasm between Vladimir and me.

He points a finger toward the exit. “Go. Go take care of Ilya. Get some perspective. You’re of no use to me here.”

I scoff, my frustration boiling over. “Oh, how convenient for you. Pushing me out when it suits you. Maybe you’re the one who should take a step back. Look at how you’re running things.”

His expression hardens further, his voice dripping with venom. “I said leave, Valentina. Don’t make me say it again.”

For a moment, I contemplate retaliating further. But the strained atmosphere in the room and the clear line Vladimir's drawn in the sand make me reconsider. Perhaps this is the push I need to reevaluate my priorities. I turn on my heel, storming out.

As the door slams shut behind me, a cold gust of wind ruffles my hair and skirt. The noisy streets of St. Petersburg surround me, but my world feels eerily silent. The rift with Vladimir weighs heavily on my mind, but there's a silver lining to his demand. Time with Ilya, away from the life of crime, might provide the clarity I so desperately seek.

However, one thought remains persistent amid the turmoil: if Vladimir doesn't trust me, then who in this tangled web of deceit can I truly rely on?

In the muted glow of my apartment, I take out the receiving end of the bug I'd covertly planted in Vladimir's office during our argument. My fingers trace its minuscule form — it's unnerving, this quiet rebellion against my own family. A web of betrayal, one I'm caught in the middle of. But given the growing rift between Vladimir and me, this tiny device might be the only thing that'll keep me one step ahead.

Sliding in earbuds, I press play, taking a moment to still the frantic tempo of my heart. My anticipation coils tighter as each whispered word snakes its way into my ear. The steady rhythm of muted voices fills the background before Vladimir's distinct tone surfaces. "The Bratva have lingered like a damned parasite. St. Petersburg is ours. We take back every ally, every business, everything they think they own. After that? Moscow will fall."

A chill runs down my spine. Moscow? They're thinking bigger than I imagined. And more than that, my brother hasn't looped me in at all on these plans.

Another voice, tinged with caution — definitely Yura — responds, "So, we target Moscow after? That's playing with fire, Vlad."

"Fire purifies," Vladimir retorts, his tone smug. "The Antonov-Nicolaevich Bratva have ruled long enough. We'll

send them a clear message about who's the real power here.”

I take a deep breath, trying to process the implications of what I'm hearing. They're planning a full-scale war. Not just any skirmish, but a methodical destruction that will turn St. Petersburg, and then Moscow, into battlegrounds. The imagery is horrifying — I envision streets turned crimson, innocent bystanders caught in the crossfire because my brother craves power.

Every moment I've shared with Roman floods my thoughts. The fire in his eyes, the magnetic pull that always draws us together, and the unexpected tenderness between us. The mission was simple: avenge Iosef, no matter the cost. But now, I find myself dangerously close to the edge, feelings for Roman muddying the waters. How the hell did I let things spiral like this?

With a shaky hand, I stop the playback. The weight of this revelation is almost suffocating. The sharp tang of my brewing coffee cuts through the room, but the anxiety, the apprehension, drowns everything else out. I want to scream, to rage against the inevitable. Roman, the supposed enemy, has worked his way into my heart. And if Vladimir's merciless plan goes into action, it won't just be Roman's blood marking the city's cobblestones.

A gnawing sense of urgency takes root. I need to act, and quickly. My next move isn't just for myself, that is clear. It's for Roman, for Ilya, and maybe for a future I haven't even dared to dream of.

Darkness encases the streets of St. Petersburg, the melancholy tune of the night accompanying me. With Lena cradling Ilya in her arms as I leave, I step out into the evening, desperate to find solace, a temporary escape from my current peril. The bar isn't particularly fancy or well-known, but it's dim and nondescript — exactly what I need right now.

The interior smells faintly of aged wood and decades-old smoke, a hint of something spicy playing in the background. Low murmurs and soft laughter drift through the air as I take a seat by the bar. The bartender nods in recognition, and I

request a club soda with lime. Something stiff sounds better, but the nausea from the night before is still fresh on my mind.

Each sip is a dance of bubbles on my tongue, but my thoughts are elsewhere. The icy coolness settles in my stomach, and I let it soothe the burning tension wrapped tightly around my heart. There's a call I need to make, a voice I need to hear. The weight of the realization pushes me to step outside, away from the noise, away from the eyes that might be watching.

The night air feels brisk against my face, cool and refreshing. My fingers hover above the screen, Roman's name glaring at me. I take a deep breath, pushing past the hesitancy and the tingling sensation in the pit of my stomach, a brief wave of nausea washing over me.

The first ring barely has time to echo when my world upends. Rough hands grab me from behind, one clamping over my mouth while another wrenches the phone from my grip. I bite, I kick, but there's more than one assailant, and they're too strong.

My heart slams against my chest, frantic and wild, as they drag me towards a sleek black car. I'm shoved into the backseat, Vladimir's piercing eyes waiting for me. A cruel smirk plays on his lips as he snatches my still-connected phone.

"Ah, Valentina, always the defiant one," he chuckles darkly, the sound cutting through the car's confines.

The voice on the other end is unmistakable. Panic-laced and desperate, Roman demands, "What the hell have you done with Valentina?"

Vladimir raises an eyebrow, his amusement evident. "Isn't it charming when enemies become lovers? Roman, I hope you savored your time with my sister. Because it's the last memory you'll have of her."

My breath hitches. Every fiber of my being screams out, but the goon next to me keeps me pinned, his grip like iron.

“You think this is about territory? Power?” Vladimir continues, malice dripping from every word. “This is for family.”

Roman’s voice is barely audible, filled with cold fury. “If you lay a finger on her, I swear—”

Vladimir cuts him off, laughing darkly. “Prepare for war, Roman. Because it’s coming, and nothing in this world can stop it.”

The line goes dead. My brother’s face, once familiar and protective, now seems like a stranger’s. And as the car speeds through the night, I know one thing for certain — I’m caught in a game where the stakes are higher than ever. The storm is here, and there’s no escaping it.

## CHAPTER 22

## ROMAN

The weight in my chest intensifies, Vladimir's chilling words echoing in my ears. My fingers, cold and shaky, swipe open my phone. Would he actually harm Valentina, his own flesh and blood? As much as I'd like to believe there are lines even the Chechens won't cross, this life has shown me that family can be more brutal than enemies.

For all I know, what I'd overheard had been nothing more than a family squabble out of context. All the same, there's no arguing with the sick feeling in my gut, one telling me something was very wrong. One thing is for certain – I'm going to find out, one way or another.

I dial into the conference line we've had for years, punching in a sequence of numbers only the five of us know. I can feel the seconds dragging as I wait for each of them to join.

Andrei's voice is first, always prompt. "Roman?"

"Everyone here?" I ask, taking a deep breath, steadying myself for the onslaught of information I'm about to unleash.

One by one, each voice chimes in – Damien with his always curious tone, Leo in his calm and collected manner, and Samuil, the fiery spirit among us.

"We're all here. What's the emergency?" Damien's voice booms with concern.

Drawing in another breath, I unleash it all. "Vladimir has threatened war, and Valentina... she's been taken."

Stunned silence fills the line. I can almost picture the expressions on each of their faces. The shock, the rage, the determination. Finally, Andrei, ever the eldest and protector, breaks the silence. “We end this. Once and for all. The Chechens have already proven beyond a shadow of doubt they’re not going to stand aside while we move into the city. And if they’re turning on their own, that’s all the more reason to take them out.”

Leo’s tech-savvy brain is already ten steps ahead. “I can get eyes everywhere. No part of this city will hide from us.”

“Good,” I say, glad for his prowess. “We need to know their every move.”

Samuil, voice calm but with a hint of cold rage, interjects, “We should consider a diversion. They’ll expect a full, open war.”

The idea of war makes my gut tighten. Part of me had hoped I’d be able to schmooze my way into a takeover of the city, to steal St. Petersburg from underneath the noses of the Chechens with a wink and a smile. I should’ve known such a tall order would be too much, even for the Closer.

I nod, even though they can’t see me. “Agreed. And Damien? I hope it doesn’t come to this, but there’s a damn good chance we’re going to need firepower.”

Damien answers, “Consider it done. Just tell me when and where.”

My brothers, bound not just by blood but by years of trust and loyalty, are my anchor. We’ve faced troubles before, but this? This is something else. This is about love and hate, interwoven in a dangerous dance.

By the time the call ends, the energy in me surges anew. The Chechen mob might have made the first move, but the Antonov-Nicolaevich Bratva? We were about to make the most impactful one.

The apartment feels quiet, almost eerily so. The shadows playing off the walls and the dim light of my laptop are the

only things keeping me company. With a glass of neat whiskey in hand, I recline in my leather chair, my thoughts racing.

To get to the bottom of this mess, to save Valentina, and possibly myself, I need answers. And what better way to get them than to tap into my vast network? I've always been a charmer, always known just the right buttons to push. It's served me well, both in love and business.

Opening an encrypted messaging application, I message Detective Larin, one of my more receptive contacts in the St. Petersburg police. Larin owes me big after I got his brother out of a particularly nasty jam a couple of years back.

*Larin, I need a deep dive into Iosef Tolensky's disappearance. Anything you have, any whispers, rumors, off-the-record confessions.*

It's a risk reaching out. The blue dots indicating Larin is typing back seem to take forever.

*At this hour? What's in it for me?*

I smirk. Always the opportunist, Larin.

*Isn't your brother's freedom enough? If you deliver, I'll owe you one.*

*Deal. But I need time. This isn't an easy one.*

*Time's what we might not have. Hurry.*

I exit the chat, taking another sip of my drink. Larin isn't my only angle. I've got people scattered across St. Petersburg's shadowy underbelly, individuals who thrive on the rumors and whispers of the night. Some are contacts I've made since moving, others are from my time visiting over the years, planting seeds for my future takeover of this town.

Now, it's time for those seeds to sprout and blossom.

Dialing another encrypted line, I reach out to Anna, a high-profile madam with connections in every corner of the city. She's another who owes me, after I helped her out of a tricky situation with a rival gang.

“Roman,” her sultry voice purrs from the other end. “To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?”

“Anna,” I greet, ever the charmer, even in the face of adversity. “I need your ears. I’m trying to track down a man named Iosef Tolensky? This would’ve been a few years back.”

She hums thoughtfully. “Sounds vaguely familiar.” She gasps in realization. “Yes, I remember that name. He was linked with the Chechen mafia but vanished a few years ago without a trace. I can dig deeper for you.”

I thank her and disconnect the call. Each lead is a possible thread to the truth, and I intend to pull on them all.

Finishing my drink, I set the glass aside, staring at the muted reflections on its surface. The pieces are beginning to fall into place, but there’s still so much to do. I’m racing against time, but I’ve always thrived under pressure.

There’s a restlessness in my chest, a gnawing, relentless unease. Every muscle twitches with tension. I’m adept at handling challenging situations, but this isn’t about business. This is about Valentina, the fiery, sharp-tongued beauty who’s gotten under my skin in a way few ever have.

My thoughts stray to Ilya, the innocent in this chaotic mess. Valentina would burn the world for him. What would Vladimir do to get to me, to break his sister, to control her? The notion makes my blood boil. I need to see for myself that the kid’s safe.

Navigating St. Petersburg’s labyrinthine streets, I find myself at Valentina’s apartment. Taking a deep breath to control the tension gnawing at my insides, I knock sharply.

A few moments later, the door opens to reveal a young woman with soft brown eyes, her dark hair pulled back in a loose ponytail. She’s a picture of youth, innocence almost, pretty in that girl-next-door kind of way. The gentle curve of her lips and the slight apprehensiveness in her eyes make me think she knows who I am.

“Can I help you?” she asks tentatively.

“Is Valentina here?” I try to keep the urgency out of my voice but fail miserably.

She shakes her head slowly, her eyes clouding with worry. “No. I’m Lena,” she introduces herself. “I look after Ilya when Valentina’s out. But... she should have been back hours ago.” Lana speaks the words more as if she’s letting her worries vent, rather than expressing them to me. She nibbles on her lower lip, a nervous habit, perhaps.

I force a smile, “And Ilya?”

“He’s asleep,” Lena whispers. “It took ages to get him to bed, poor thing. He kept asking about his mother.”

“Look, Lena,” I begin, taking a deep breath, “I know this might sound strange, but it’s crucial that you let me stay here tonight. It’s... important.”

She looks surprised, clearly unsure. “Stay here tonight? I don’t know...”

Before she can finish her sentence, a sleepy voice interrupts from behind her, “Roman?” I see Ilya, rubbing his eyes, his hair tousled, standing in pajamas, a look of relief on his face. “Roman, you’re here!”

Lena looks between us, her eyes widening in realization. “Are you the man from the park?”

I nod, crouching to Ilya’s level. “Yeah, little guy and I have had some adventures together.”

“Valentina told me about you, about what a good man you are,” she states, though she is still hesitant.

I look up at Lena. “I promise, I’m here to help.”

She hesitates, then steps aside, allowing me entrance. “Alright, if Valentina and Ilya trust you, that’s enough for me. But remember, he’s everything. Don’t let anything happen to him.”

“Trust me,” I respond firmly, “I won’t.”

Lena casts a final, lingering glance at the young boy, her expression one of muted concern mixed with resignation.

“You can sleep on the couch, if you wish. I’ll take Ilya to his room and stay with him.”

She hesitates for a moment, her gaze flitting between the boy and me. She tells me she’ll get blankets from the linen closet and leaves the room.

Ilya’s little face crumples, tears brimming in his eyes. “Where’s Mama?” he asks in a tremulous voice.

I kneel, ruffling his hair gently. “She’s working, champ. She’ll be back soon,” I promise, fighting back my own rising concern.

Lena returns quickly, depositing a pillow and blankets on the couch. She tells Ilya to come to bed, but he runs to me for a hug. I hug him tightly, promising him everything is perfectly fine. He follows Lena reluctantly, and I hear the distinct sound of a lock turning on the bedroom door. I understand her fear and don’t blame her for taking precautions.

I let my gaze wander over the apartment. The place is filled with memories: photographs of Valentina and Ilya, art projects, a life of love and simplicity. But with every second I spend there, it becomes evident there’s much more to Valentina than meets the eye. My instinct pushes me to investigate, to know more.

Behind a family portrait hanging beside the fireplace, I find a sleek Glock, its cold metallic touch contrasting the warmth of the memories. I almost laugh. It’s hidden in plain sight. She’s crafty, this woman.

The living room is a stark juxtaposition to what I discover next. As I peruse through the bookshelf in her small study, I notice a few titles that seem out of place, considering they’re surrounded by children’s books and romance novels. Books on weaponry, advanced combat techniques, and languages from all corners of the world.

Tucked behind them, I find a slim, leather-bound journal. Flipping it open, I note the pages are filled with precise, meticulous handwriting detailing various assignments, names,

and locations. All was written cryptically, giving no indication of her intentions.

In the corner, a seemingly innocuous potted plant catches my attention. When I pull it aside, I reveal a small, concealed safe. Without the combination, I can't access it, but I'd bet it's packed with intel—currency, fake IDs, possibly even more weapons.

I make my way to a bedroom I have yet to see, a thick lock protecting its contents. A little work soon has it open, my skills from back when I was a young street tough coming out through muscle memory. The door opens slowly, and I see the fusion of her worlds evident. Beside a desk filled with bills, projects from Ilya's school, and family photos, there's an intricate computer setup.

Multiple screens display a mix of encrypted chats, maps marked with points of interest, and facial recognition software scanning crowds. Next to the keyboard, a custom-made, pearl-handled knife rests, its blade gleaming menacingly in the dim light.

One drawer, slightly ajar, piques my interest. Inside, there's a collection of small trinkets: a locket, a feather, a silver coin. Tokens from her assignments, I assume. Every killer has their rituals, and perhaps these are Valentina's, symbols of missions completed, lives taken.

Curiosity drives me to the walk-in closet, and it contains costumes of all kinds — a nurse, a police officer, a corporate executive — accompanied by a collection of wigs that would make a Hollywood star jealous.

It's a revelation. The very dichotomy of her existence, being a mother on one hand and a deadly assassin on the other, is intriguing. I marvel at the double life she's been leading. It's not every day you meet someone who's a perfect blend of tenderness and ruthlessness.

Anxiety claws at my gut. I can't shake the thought that Vladimir might have done something to her. Every passing second just reinforces my fear.

I lift a chair from the dining table and carry it to the front door. I'll protect Ilya and his babysitter tonight, and first thing in the morning, earlier than they would like, I'd bet, I'm taking Ilya with me to a secure location that will be safe, and Lena will be safer if she's nowhere near us.

Decision made, I rest, though I don't sleep. My mind is too frantic to sleep. I failed to protect Valentina; I will not fail to protect her son.

## CHAPTER 23

**B**ars block the window, casting a pattern of shadows on the plain white room. It's too pristine, too clinical—feels like I'm in some sick, twisted version of a spa retreat. Except instead of hot towels and calming music, I get 1970's paneled walls and the echo of my own rage.

“Let me out, you bastard!” I roar, fists pounding on the door with as much fury as I can muster. The metal surface is unyielding, cold against the heat of my anger.

“Valya,” Vladimir's voice filters through, muffled by the thick barrier. “You know I can't do that.”

I grit my teeth. “I need to see my son! You can't keep me away from him.” Panic threads through me. I can't—won't—let anything happen to Ilya.

“I'll take care of him,” he responds, his tone dripping with a twisted kind of concern. “He's my nephew, after all. I'll pick him up, ensure he's safe.”

My brother might be many things, but the trustworthy guardian of my child he is not. “You think I'd trust you with him after this?”

There's a pause. I can picture him—leaning against the door from the other side, probably with an infuriating, smug smirk on his face. “You're the one who betrayed us,” he finally says, each word dripping with accusation.

The audacity of his claim stops me in my tracks. Betrayal? Was standing up for the truth, for my own feelings, betrayal? My voice trembles with a mixture of rage and helplessness.

“Are you so blind you can’t see that maybe I wanted to find the truth about Iosef’s death? Without bloodshed?”

He scoffs. “You and your love-struck fantasies. Roman’s an Antonov-Nicolaevich. They’re our enemies. Always have been, always will be.”

I press my forehead against the door, closing my eyes momentarily. “All I wanted was answers, Vladi. Not another war. If you’d looked past your damn pride and ego, maybe you’d see that.”

Silence reigns for what feels like an eternity. “You’ve always been too soft, Valya,” he finally speaks. “It was only a matter of time before it came back to bite you. Now, you’re going to sit in there and think about your choices.”

“Like hell I will!” I shout, kicking the door, frustration seeping into every fiber of my being. “I won’t rest until I’m out of here and back with Ilya.”

No response.

As the minutes stretch on, the reality of my confinement sinks in. I’m trapped, and Vladimir holds all the cards. At least for now. My mind races, strategizing, already plotting my next move. My brother might have the upper hand momentarily, but I am the Ghost. He’s about to find out what happens when you corner someone like me.

In the cold silence following Vladimir’s departure, the weight of the room presses in on me. It’s stifling, as if the very walls are closing in, and a sudden bout of nausea twists my stomach. I can feel beads of sweat forming on my forehead, despite the chill that runs down my spine. My head swims, a deep dizziness clouding my vision and making the dimly lit room spin.

I stagger to the metal cot, trying to hold myself up, but my legs buckle beneath me, sending me tumbling to the floor. The metallic taste of bile rises in my throat, and I press a hand to my mouth, struggling to keep from being sick. My entire body is rebelling against me, cold sweat drenching my back and

hair, while my skin burns as though I'm trapped in a fever dream.

For a split second, as I lie prone on the cold ground, a fleeting thought crosses my mind: could I be pregnant? The idea hits me like a freight train, but almost as quickly, I push it away. *Impossible*, I tell myself. *You're just under stress, which is making you sick*. Still, the nagging doubt remains. The symptoms are familiar—too familiar. But now isn't the time to indulge in wild speculations. My current predicament demands my full attention.

With a grunt, I force myself to sit up, even though the world tilts dangerously around me. Using the cot as support, I drag myself up. Determination fuels me. I won't let Vladimir break me. I can't afford to. Not when the safety of my son is at stake.

I pound on the locked door with all the strength I can muster, my fists hammering at the metal even though my body feels weak. "Let me out!" I scream. "I have to see my son!"

But the only reply is a cold, suffocating silence.

Desperation and fear set in. I search every inch of the room, looking for an escape, any kind of weak point. But the room is fortified. A prison. Vladimir didn't take any chances when it came to his sister, it seems.

Hopelessness bears down on me, and I slump against the wall. Tears spring to my eyes, but I wipe them away furiously. Crying won't help me. It won't change the fact that, for all I know, Roman could be dead. Or that Vladimir might very well keep me from my son indefinitely.

Memories of my time with Roman flit across my mind's eye: the way he looked at me, the passion, the trust. Was it all for nothing? Was it just a fleeting moment doomed from the start? Was it worth it?

My thoughts circle back to the slight dizziness, the nausea, the feverish feeling. The idea that I could be pregnant gnaws at the edges of my consciousness, but I force it down again. It's just stress, I tell myself. It has to be.

In the midst of my anguish, a glint catches my eye. A shimmer of hope in this hellhole. One of the wall panels seems oddly out of place, with a faint outline almost imperceptible against the dim room lighting. Curiosity piqued, I force myself up and edge closer to inspect it.

Carefully, I press on the loose panel and feel it shift. My heart races. Kicking it with precision, the panel gives way, revealing a small, dark crawl space. It's barely the width of my shoulders and stretches into darkness. The unknown path promises both hope and danger, but it's better than sitting here waiting to be disposed of. Taking a deep breath, I ease myself into the confined space.

The crawl space is suffocating. My chest heaves but the thought of Ilya, of freedom, keeps pushing me forward. Dust tickles my nose and cobwebs brush against my face, but I force my mind to focus on the escape, trying to remember every stealth technique I've learned over the years.

Finally, the confined passageway leads to another loose panel. Pressing an ear to it, I strain to hear any sounds of movement. The distant murmur of voices in conversation reaches me. Drawing on my years as the Ghost, I cautiously remove the panel and peer into the dim corridor.

Several Chechen gangsters are lounging around, deep in conversation. Their backs are turned to me. Slipping through the shadows, I weave between pockets of darkness, making sure I stay out of their line of sight. My senses are heightened, every sound amplified. The soft shuffle of a boot, the murmur of a voice, the distant hum of a space heater — everything registers.

Suddenly, just as I think I'm in the clear, a door creaks open behind me. I barely have time to duck behind a pole. One of the men steps out, his gaze scanning the corridor. We lock eyes for a split second. I move first.

Swiftly and silently, I close the distance between us, twisting his arm behind his back. Before he can even let out a gasp of surprise, I slip my other arm around his neck, locking him into a chokehold. His struggles are futile, his movements

becoming weaker as oxygen deprivation kicks in. I count the seconds, feeling his pulse beneath my fingers. The weight of his body threatens to bring me down, but adrenaline keeps me standing tall. Within moments, he goes limp, unconscious.

I quickly drag him to a nearby closet. In the low light of the supply closet, I recognize the gangster's face – Yuri, some kid barely in his twenties who'd joined for thrills and excitement. Perhaps he'll wake up and, realizing one of the deadliest assassins in Russia held his life in her hands and had mercy on him, reconsider his line of work, find something a little safer.

With that potential threat out of the way, I navigate through the building's maze-like corridors.

The night air hits me like a wave when I finally emerge outside. It's both refreshing and sobering. I've made it out, but the real journey — the journey to rescue my son and confront Vladimir — is just beginning.

Cold air bites my skin, the initial relief from the stifling room replaced by the harsh reality of the Russian winter. Frost clings to the world around me, shimmering under the dim streetlights. The icy wind snakes through my insufficient attire, reminding me of how unprepared I am for the elements. Each breath feels like inhaling shards of glass. There's no time to stop and think, though. Every second wasted increases the chances of being discovered.

I wrap my arms around my body, trying to contain whatever warmth I can, and move quickly through the silent streets. My footsteps are the only sound, crunching softly against the snow. Buildings loom on either side, their windows dark and unwelcoming. Here in the city's underbelly, everything is bathed in an eerie, ethereal light.

The knowledge that I'm being hunted by my own is a gut punch. Betrayal is a bitter pill, and the realization that I might have to fight family is terrifying. But the thought of Ilya, so young and innocent, being caught in the crossfire propels me forward.

My mind races as I consider my options. I need to change clothes, get some weapons, find a safe place for my son. And I need to contact Roman. Somehow. My relationship with the Bratva leader is complicated, to say the least. But if there's anyone who can help in this situation, it's him. Assuming, of course, that Vladimir hasn't gotten to him first.

Pushing the dread away, I focus on my immediate concern. Home. I have to get to Ilya. The thought of my brother taking him is too much to bear.

Seeing a small corner shop ahead, its lights dimly flickering, I make a quick decision. I approach, pressing myself against the store's wall, and steal a glance inside. The shopkeeper is busy, engrossed in conversation with a customer. Perfect.

Silently, I slide through the entrance, blending into the dim ambiance. With a practiced eye, I skim the racks for clothing that will fit and be suitable for the cold. A thick sweater, a woolen scarf, a pair of gloves. Efficiently, I strip off my lighter layers and don the warmer clothing right there in the shadows between the aisles. My movements are fluid, silent, a dance of necessity. Every second counts.

Before the shopkeeper or the customer have even the slightest inkling, I'm out, merging with the darkness once more, the door barely making a sound as it clicks shut behind me.

Dressed and ready, my thoughts turn to home and my son.

## CHAPTER 24

## ROMAN

**A**fter enjoying a room service lunch, I take a break from trying to get Ilya to giggle, giving the boy my undivided attention, when the door to the penthouse hotel room I've rented bursts open. My brothers, all of them, file in with their significant others. The entrance would be impressive if not for the shock etched on their faces at the sight of me—Roman Nicolaevich, known charmer and reckless playboy—playing with a kid.

“What the hell, Roman?” Andrei's voice booms, his authoritative demeanor instantly taking charge of the room. His green eyes, a mirror of my own, flick from me to the boy, scrutinizing. “Please tell me you didn't kidnap him.”

“Of course I didn't,” I reply.

Samuil grunts from the doorway, his broad shoulders nearly filling the frame. “Who's the kid?”

Taking a deep breath, I stand up, lifting Ilya into my arms. “Let me get him settled for a nap and I'll be right back.”

I carry Ilya to the guest room and get him tucked in. He looks at me with big eyes and asks, “Is my mama coming soon?”

I don't want to lie to the kid, but I don't want to frighten him any more than he already is. “Not too much longer, buddy.” I brush his hair back from his head and tuck him in. He closes his eyes; he's exhausted, poor guy, and I'm glad he didn't put up a fight about the nap.

“Alright, here’s the deal,” I say as I return to the living room. I recount the twisted tale—meeting Valentina, finding out about her ties to the Chechen mob, her supposedly dead fiancé, the threat to Ilya, and everything else in between.

As I speak, my brothers exchange glances, processing the information. Andrei’s face remains inscrutable, but I can see the cogs turning behind those eyes. Sandra stands close to him, her hand resting on his arm, silently offering her support.

When I finish, Leo breaks the silence. “This is big, Roman. The Chechen mob isn’t to be trifled with.”

“I’m aware,” I reply tersely.

Samuil growls, his fists clenching. “They won’t touch the boy. Not if they know what’s good for them.”

Damien leans against the wall, his face uncharacteristically dark. “So what’s the plan?”

“We find Valentina, get her back, and make sure the Chechens understand they messed with the wrong family,” I declare. The resolve in my voice is unwavering. I don’t know exactly how we’re going to achieve it, but I’m not giving up without a fight.

Andrei nods slowly. “We’ll back you up, little brother. But let’s do this smartly.”

I smile, relief flooding through me. Having my family by my side, I feel invincible. Whatever happens next, we’ll face it together.

“We need leverage,” Sandra states, her blue eyes thoughtful. “If we can present the Chechens with the real culprits behind Ilya’s father’s demise, they might be more inclined to negotiate.”

I nod. “That’s what I’ve been thinking. I’ve had a mole in the police department doing some digging. From what I’ve found, both of Iosef’s parents are dead.”

Leo raises an eyebrow. “So, no direct family for the missing fiancé?”

“There’s an aunt, alive and possibly in the city. If we can find her, she might provide us with some information. Perhaps shed some light on what really happened that day,” I reveal, taking out the sheet of paper with the family tree printed on it.

Damien whistles. “You always did have the best connections.”

“There are rumors he isn’t actually dead, though I can’t get any concrete leads on that,” I explain. “That’s why I think it’s important to talk to the aunt.”

“Who told you he ran?”

“A source,” I say, and they understand that’s all the information I’m willing to share.

Samuil cracks his knuckles, that familiar glint of eagerness in his eyes. “So, we find this aunt and ask her some questions?”

“It’s not that simple,” Andrei cautions, leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “We don’t want to scare her. It’s crucial that we approach her tactfully.”

Nikita, ever the voice of reason, adds, “She might be our only lead to understanding what happened. If she feels threatened, she might clam up, or worse, go to the Chechens.”

“We’ll have to split up,” I suggest. “Some of us can work on finding more information about the aunt and approaching her. The others should focus on keeping Ilya safe and looking into possible hideouts or places Valentina might be.”

Leo nods. “I’ll team up with Damien. We can work the logistics, get ourselves prepared for war if need be.”

“We need to check on the weapons shipment,” Damien adds.

“I’ll handle the aunt,” I say.

Sandra cuts in. “I’ll handle intelligence on potential places the Chechens might be holding Valentina. Darling, care to assist?”

“It would be my pleasure, dear,” Andrei replies with a smile.

Samuil nods toward me. “And I’ll go with you. You could show up at this aunt’s place, open the door, and be staring down the barrel of a Chechen gun.”

“Hopefully, it won’t come to that,” I say. “But backup is welcome, all the same.”

With the plan settled, my penthouse room transforms into a mission hub. We pull out laptops, maps of the city, and use connections to gather as much information as we can.

Andrei’s deep voice is the last I hear before my team disperses. “We find Valentina. We protect Ilya. We make the Chechens regret they ever crossed the Antonov-Nicolaevich family.”

As we finalize our strategy, Nikita steps forward, her ballet-honed grace evident in every movement. “I’ll watch over Ilya. This hotel is probably the safest place he could be.”

“Thank you,” I say, my gratitude genuine. It’s not just about keeping Ilya safe. Nikita might be able to soothe him in a way none of us brutish men can.

Samuil, meanwhile, has already started loading up, collecting weapons and tools I’d moved with me from my apartment. “Ready when you are,” he says with a grunt.

I take a deep breath, pulling my coat tighter. “Let’s find this aunt.”

Exiting the hotel, Samuil and I quickly head to the garage. Samuil breaks the silence, his voice gruff, “You think this aunt knows anything?”

I shrug. “It’s a shot in the dark, but she’s our best lead. We have nothing else to go on.”

Samuil nods, keeping his eyes on the road. “Just remember – we’re playing with fire here. The Chechens won’t be too pleased if they realize we’re poking around.”

“I know,” I reply, my knuckles white on the wheel. “But Ilya and Valentina... they’re worth the risk.”

Samuil grimaces. “You’d better be right.”

The muted hum of the city surrounds me as I drive, but my thoughts are louder and far more demanding. Every turn, every streetlight, paints memories of Valentina on the canvas of my mind. The way she moved, the way she spoke, the silent yet intense fire that always burned in her eyes.

I take a deep breath, the cold winter air filling my lungs and grounding me. Our lives are ensnared in a deadly dance of loyalties and betrayals, but amid all the chaos, there’s a singular truth: what Valentina and I have is worth saving. She’s not just the Ghost, the skilled and feared assassin. She’s Valentina, the woman who has come to mean everything to me.

The tangled web of our respective worlds would challenge us, test our resolve, and push us to our limits. But in that challenge, I find clarity. No matter which side of the fence we started on, right now, our paths have converged. We need each other. Not just as allies, but as two souls reaching out for a connection.

With that resolution in mind, I continue, each mile drawing me closer to answers, to Valentina, and to the future we might still carve out together.

The aunt’s last known address leads us to an old, weathered apartment building on the outskirts of the city. Its pale blue paint is chipping, and the windows are dimly lit. There’s an air of melancholy about the place, suggesting it has witnessed many tales of woe.

We ascend the creaky stairs, reaching a door marked 3B. Taking a deep breath, I knock. No response. I knock again, louder. After several moments, the door opens a crack, revealing a wary eye.

I’m all smiles. Time to work.

## CHAPTER 25

**M**y heart pounds like a drum as I approach my apartment building. The air is thick with tension, every shadow a potential threat. The place is crawling with Vladimir's goons—Chechen thugs who wouldn't think twice about putting a bullet in my head.

Luckily for me, I've been trained to blend into the shadows. I take advantage of the dying light, the way the streetlamps create pools of illumination interrupted by darkness. I keep to the less lit areas, my every step calculated. I use the noise of a passing bus to mask the sound of my movement, slipping through a side entrance I know the security cameras don't cover.

Inside, I climb the stairs rather than take the elevator. No point in announcing my arrival with a ding. I reach my floor and press my back against the wall, peeking just enough to scan the hallway. Two guys stand near my door. I can see their breath fogging in the cold air as they talk in low voices. It's now or never.

I spot a small piece of metal at my feet and quickly pick it up. With a flick of my wrist, I toss it down the opposite end of the hall. The sound of clattering metal echoes, distracting them. The moment they turn their backs, I move. Like a wraith, I slip past them, silently unlocking my door and entering my home.

My eyes dart around, half-expecting to find my son hiding somewhere. But there's nothing—no laughter, no toys on the floor, no sign of life. It's as if the air has been sucked out of

the room, leaving a vacuum that draws all the warmth out of me. Panic surges through my veins, a tidal wave of fear and dread. Where is Ilya?

The thoughts are like bullets, each one hitting its mark. If anything has happened to my son, I'll burn this city to the ground. Vladimir will wish he never crossed me, that much is certain.

I can't shake the feeling something's off as I walk through my apartment. It's not just the empty silence, the absence of my son's laughter, or even the cold sense of foreboding gripping me. It's something subtler. Things are out of place—chairs slightly moved, drawers not fully closed, like ripples in a pond betraying a disturbance.

And then I catch it—the unmistakable scent of Roman's aftershave lingering in the air. It's distinct, woody and warm, a smell I've come to associate with our close encounters. It hangs in the room, not overpowering but clear. And as soon as I recognize it, my mind starts racing.

Could Roman have been here? Did he come looking for Ilya? I hope to God he did. I remember the last time we spoke, just before my call was abruptly cut short, and how he said he'd do anything to help me. Despite our complicated history, I know deep down he would never harm my son. Roman might be many things—calculating, cunning, ruthless when he needs to be—but he's not a monster who would hurt a child.

For a split second, I let myself imagine Roman swooping in, snatching Ilya away from this mess like some kind of action movie hero. The thought brings a reluctant smile to my face. I need to trust him, at least in this. After all, if he was willing to help me even when I was pointing a gun at his head, why wouldn't he save Ilya?

But trust, even if it's warranted, doesn't solve my immediate problem. Where the hell is Roman now? Finding him suddenly becomes the focal point of all my energy. My gaze falls on my small home office area. The lock has been opened and things are out of place, though only subtly. He was most certainly here.

I boot up my old desktop, tucked away in the corner for emergencies. I access a hidden network I keep for contingencies, one only a few people even know exists. Logging in, I look for any signs, any messages from Roman. But there's nothing. Frustration surges, burning hot and quick like a flash fire.

Slipping into my bedroom, I head straight for the walk-in closet. I slide my hand along the wall, stopping at a concealed panel. With a firm push, the wall gives way, revealing an arsenal hidden from view. Rows of firearms, knives, ammunition, and various other tools of my trade greet me like old friends. The sight has never been more comforting.

First things first—body armor. I pull out a slim Kevlar vest, engineered for maximum protection without sacrificing mobility. It's designed to stop most small arms fire and won't slow me down. Slipping it over my tank top and under my sweater, I adjust the straps, ensuring a snug fit.

Next, firearms. My hand hovers for a moment between options before settling on a Glock 19. Compact, reliable, easy to use. I check the chamber, load a magazine, and slip it into a concealed holster at the small of my back.

For backup, I choose a Beretta Bobcat. A smaller caliber, but sometimes subtlety is just as important as firepower. That goes into an ankle holster. Spare magazines for both go into pouches on my belt.

I turn my attention to blades. A slim, double-edged combat knife catches my eye. Made of high-carbon steel, it's both strong and sharp—perfect for close-quarters combat. I sheathe it horizontally on my lower back for easy access. I also take a few throwing knives, tucking them into concealed pockets sewn into the inside of my coat. Poison may be my weapon of choice, but that doesn't mean I'm afraid to get messy should the situation require it.

Finally, miscellaneous tools—a compact first aid kit, a set of lock picks, a small can of pepper spray, and a few smoke grenades. Every single item is calculated, serving a specific purpose for the chaos that's about to unfold.

I lock eyes with my reflection as I put on my gloves, each one custom-fit with reinforced knuckles. The face staring back at me is focused, cold, almost unrecognizable. The moment Vladimir decided to drag my son into this mess was the moment he crossed an unforgivable line. He turned this from a battle into a war. Now it's time for him and his lapdogs to face the Ghost.

My preparations are interrupted by a sudden noise—my emergency phone vibrating on the table, flashing a coded message. It's a signal from a hidden security camera, indicating movement outside the apartment.

Pulling on my coat, I take one last look at the room. The atmosphere feels heavier, as if sensing the impending violence. For the first time in a long time, the weight feels right on my shoulders. The Ghost is back, and hell is coming with her.

## CHAPTER 26

**S**triding up to the quaint house where Iosef's aunt resides, I adjust my tailored jacket and put on my best charming smile. Samuil, ever the imposing figure, lingers a step behind me. His presence is usually enough to make anyone wary, and today, we need to disarm suspicions, not raise them.

The door creaks open, revealing a middle-aged woman with guarded eyes. She sizes us up instantly. "Can I help you?" Her voice is cautious.

I extend my hand. "Hello, ma'am, I'm Roman Nicolaevich. I used to work with Iosef. This is my brother, Samuil."

Her eyes narrow slightly as they shift to Samuil. I can see the wheels turning in her head. I preemptively put her at ease. "Don't worry about Samuil here; he may look like a mountain, but he's a teddy bear at heart. Aren't you, Samuil?"

Samuil grumbles something affirmative, managing a half-smile that softens his features just enough.

"And why are you here?" she asks, still half-hidden behind the door.

"We just wanted to find out if there is anything you might need. The company wants to take care of you, but it took us a while to track you down."

Seemingly placated, she opens the door wider. "Well, alright. Please come in. I'll put on some tea."

Once inside, we're led to a cozy living room adorned with family photos, knickknacks, and the comforting scent of home. She offers us seats and disappears into the kitchen.

"You think she's buying it?" Samuil whispers.

"Of course she is," I say, "Building rapport is my specialty, remember?"

When she returns, she's carrying a tray laden with teacups and a plate of cookies. The tea is served in delicate china cups that look like they've seen generations. We exchange pleasantries, she talks about the weather, and I nod along. It's all part of the dance.

Finally, I steer the conversation where I want it to go. "I really am sorry it's taken us so long to reach out to you. To see if you needed anything since Iosef's been gone."

Her eyes meet mine, and I can see the conflict there. "Iosef has been missing for some time now," she finally says, taking a sip of her tea.

The moment is delicate, so I tread lightly. "I know. I apologize again. You know, I've always been a little fuzzy on the details of his disappearance."

She studies me for a long beat, and I let her. I'm the picture of openness, eyes sincere, posture relaxed. I decide to sweeten the pot just a little bit more.

"You know, Iosef was always an excellent colleague. Very reliable, always had my back during projects," I remark casually, studying her reactions as if she were a book I'm trying to read.

She meets my eyes and there's a pause, almost imperceptible but telling. "Yes, he's a very responsible man," she says, her lips curling into a soft smile.

I hide my internal celebration behind a sip of tea. The tea tastes sweet, but my victory tastes sweeter. Her choice of words, the present tense "is" instead of "was" is a game-changer.

One, it tells me Iosef is alive. I've been operating under the grim assumption that we were essentially looking for a dead man. It changes the calculus of the situation, shifts it from an unsolvable equation to a complex but solvable one.

Two, her subtle affirmation implies more than just his well-being; it implies knowledge of where he might be. It's the foothold I've been searching for, a glimmer of hope in a dark tunnel.

Samuil, of course, catches on too. I can see it in the subtle raise of his eyebrows, the slight upward curl of his lip. He's a man of few words, but his expressions speak volumes.

"I miss working with him, you know?" I continue, letting a note of vulnerability seep into my voice. "When someone you're used to seeing every day suddenly isn't there anymore, it leaves a void."

She hesitates, her eyes dropping to her tea. I can sense her inner struggle—the conflict between her protective instincts and the truth bubbling just below the surface. When she finally speaks, it's with a careful tone, as if she's choosing each word deliberately.

"I appreciate your concern for my nephew. He's a private person, but he has people who care about him. I'm sure he'd be pleased to know you're one of them."

It's a well-crafted answer, elusive yet encouraging. It tells me she won't reveal everything, not yet. But it also tells me there's something to reveal. And right now, that's enough.

I lean back, setting my tea down. "Thank you for your candor. It means more than you can imagine."

Samuil finally breaks his silence, "We should get going."

"Yes," I agree, standing up. "Before we go, is there anything we can do for you?"

Iosef's aunt shakes her head. "No, I'm very well taken care of, thank you. It was nice to meet you, though."

As we leave, I feel a rush of exhilaration. We're one significant step closer to finding Iosef, to making sense of this

chaotic puzzle, and most importantly, to saving Valentina. The stakes are still sky-high, but for the first time, the odds don't seem quite so stacked against us.

As Samuil and I step into the brisk air outside, there's a palpable sense of relief. The conversation with Iosef's aunt was a dance around landmines, each question loaded, each answer a potential trigger. We managed to navigate it, to come out with more than we went in with, and the gravity is not lost on either of us.

"Looks like we've got a lead, a real one this time," Samuil says, exhaling a cloud of chilled breath.

"Yeah," I reply, my hands deep in my pockets. "But it's complicated. Iosef was Valentina's fiancé. What happens when we find him? Does that mean whatever's between Valentina and me is done?"

Samuil shrugs, "Life's not a soap opera, Roman. It's messy, and you deal with it. If Valentina's feelings change because Iosef's back in the picture, then you've got your answer. And if they don't, you've got a different answer."

His brutal simplicity cuts through the fog of my apprehensions. "You're right. Jumping to conclusions never solved anything. But it seems like Iosef disappeared for a reason. Before anything, I need to find out what made him walk away."

Samuil nods, understanding flickering in his eyes. "We all have our reasons for the things we do. Finding out his could change everything."

Determined not to lose the momentum, I turn back toward the apartment and ring the doorbell again. Iosef's aunt looks surprised to see us return so soon but allows us back in. "Sorry to intrude again," I start, wearing my most charming smile. "But if you could share Iosef's phone number, I'd love to catch up with him properly. For old times' sake."

She hesitates for a moment, but my earlier work at rapport-building pays off. She checks her phone, then scribbles

something on a piece of paper and hands it to me. “Here. But please, be discreet.”

“Of course,” I assure her as we exit. “Thank you.”

Back in the car, I clutch the piece of paper like it’s made of gold. Because, in a way, it is. It’s a ticket to answers, a lifeline to Valentina, and a potential solution to a problem that could ignite a gang war.

“This is it, Samuil,” I say, almost in disbelief. “A real, solid lead. We find Iosef, we find out what’s going on, and we end this insanity.”

Samuil starts the car and grins, “Well, then let’s not keep the man waiting. Time to roll the dice.”

I hold up the piece of paper between us, catching the fleeting sunlight filtering through the clouds. “You’re looking at the best roll we’ve had in this entire messed-up game. And I intend to capitalize on it.”

As the car roars to life and we pull out onto the street, I can’t help but think of Valentina—of her strength, her determination, her unyielding love for her son. It fuels me, gives me purpose. Finding Iosef isn’t just a mission; it’s a vow, a promise to the woman who’s become the center of my chaotic world.

I send a quick message to Damien, letting him know what I’ve found out. I send him the number too. If there’s more information to be gleaned, Damien will be the one to do it.

It doesn’t take long at all for my half-brother to get back to me. My phone hums in my pocket as I step out of the car, signaling the receipt of a message. I swipe the screen open to find Damien’s text: *Got something. Check your email.*

“A moment,” I say to Samuil, who is leaning on the car with his arms crossed, watching the pedestrians pass by with a kind of casual scrutiny only an enforcer like him can muster.

I open the encrypted email from Damien. Attached is a comprehensive dossier on Iosef, including his last known location. I knew I could count on Damien; the man has a knack for unearthing what others bury.

“Anything useful?” Samuil asks, catching the change in my demeanor.

“More than useful. We have an address,” I respond, looking up from the phone. “Damien pulled through. It’s a good lead.”

Samuil’s eyes narrow a little, capturing the gravity of the moment. “So, we’re doing this?”

“We’re doing this,” I confirm. “Be ready for whatever’s next.”

He nods in understanding. “Got it.”

I send a quick message to Damien, thanking him for the information and advising him to stay alert.

Before I turn to leave, I take one last look at the bustling neighborhood around us, the people who are unaware of the high-stakes game unfolding in their midst. My thoughts drift momentarily to Valentina, the woman who’s become an unexpected but essential part of this intricate web. Finding Trefor is not just about leverage or strategies; it’s about untangling the knot that binds her to a past full of uncertainties and dangers.

For her, and for the unforeseeable future I find myself increasingly wanting to share with her, this is a lead I can’t afford to lose. It’s time for a face-to-face chat with the elusive ex-fiancé. Whatever secrets Iosef has been hiding, I intend to bring them to light.

## CHAPTER 27

## VALENTINA

The streets are slick with the remnants of a recent snowfall, mirroring the chill in my bones. I need to find Roman. I need to find my son. My options are limited; it's not like I can just pop into Roman's penthouse and ask for a cup of tea. But I've got another card up my sleeve.

Across the street from my besieged home sits a local bar, a likely hub for loose tongues and even looser affiliations. It's a gamble, but when you're desperate, the odds don't matter. You play the hand you're dealt.

Striding up to the entrance, I let my disguise take over. A crisp white shirt, a black pencil skirt, and a demeanor that screams, "Don't mess with me; I'm from the government." I've forged the Health Department badge, memorized the lingo. I even put my hair up in a severe bun for the effect.

The bar is a hive of activity. Men swigging vodka, murmuring over business deals, eyeing the women who linger at the periphery. The air is thick with desperation and cigarette smoke, but it's the scent of information I'm after.

"I need to see the manager," I declare to the first staff member I see, flashing my fake ID with practiced ease.

"Certainly, ma'am," he stammers, clearly unnerved. The power of a suit and a badge and a little confidence. He leads me through the labyrinth of tables to a cramped office at the back.

The manager, a weary man with a comb-over and a growing paunch, rises from his desk. "What can I do for you,

inspector?” He eyes the badge but doesn’t question it. They never do.

“I need to inspect the premises. Recent reports suggest health violations.”

His eyes widen. “At this hour?” He checks himself right away. “Of course, of course. Right this way.”

As he guides me through the kitchen, the storage, and the restrooms, my eyes are scanning, my ears finely tuned. I ask questions I don’t care about: “When was the last pest control?” “Show me the cleaning logs.” It keeps him occupied, makes this look legitimate. All the while, I’m listening to the chatter, tuning in for any mention of Roman or activity concerning my home across the street.

Nothing. Not a word. If Roman has been here, there’s no trail to follow. The manager is sweating bullets by the time I’m done, clearly fearful for his livelihood. I send him off to find some paperwork, getting the man out of my hair for a short time, at least.

I’ve barely left the manager’s line of sight when I spot my real target—the computer sitting on his cluttered desk. I’ve got minutes, maybe less, to do what I need to do. Taking advantage of the time, I quickly make my way over and wake the computer from sleep mode. It’s not password protected. Amateur mistake.

I open the software for the surveillance cameras and speed through the footage from the past day. My pulse is a frantic rhythm in my ears, a ticking clock keeping me on edge. What I’m looking for is a needle in a digital haystack, but I have no choice but to keep scanning the grainy images, clicking through various timestamps until I find it.

There.

The picture quality isn’t great, but it doesn’t need to be. I’d recognize that silhouette anywhere, the way Roman holds himself as he walks. And stumbling to keep up with him, is Ilya. My heart clenches at the sight of my son, but it’s a feeling

of bittersweet relief. They're leaving the house, walking briskly toward a parked car.

Minutes later, the screen fills with men I'd recognize as part of the Chechen mob even if they wore disguises. The timeline adds another layer of gravity to what I'm seeing—Roman must have gotten Ilya out just in time. I feel a mix of rage and gratitude so potent it almost chokes me. Rage at the men who would dare to step onto my property, who'd dare to threaten my son; gratitude that Roman got to him first.

I freeze the frame, squinting to make out the details of the car Roman and Ilya get into—a dark sedan. I can just barely make out the make and model, and a partial license plate. It's not much, but it's a start.

I snap a quick photo of the screen with my phone. There's no time to dig for more, to see where they might have gone. I hear footsteps approaching. The manager's coming back. I quickly close the surveillance program and put the computer to sleep, turning just in time to see the manager step back into the office.

"Find everything you needed, Inspector?" he asks, an undercurrent of relief in his voice. He offers me the paperwork, and I take it, giving the sheets a perfunctory look before handing them back.

I flash him a dry smile. "For the most part, yes. You'll hear from us soon."

And with that, I leave. As I step out into the night, my mind is racing. Roman has Ilya; they're both safe, for now. And I have a make, a model, and part of a license plate—fragments of a lifeline I have to follow, because it's all I've got.

It's a thin thread in a tangled web, but it's mine to unravel. And God help anyone who stands in my way.

I walk a block to a twenty-four-hour internet café and boot up my laptop. I start from where the video ended and retrace Roman's route, using a combination of CCTV footage from

local businesses and a few well-placed questions to people who don't realize they're giving me valuable information.

The breadcrumbs lead me to a grand hotel in the heart of downtown St. Petersburg, all chandeliers and marble floors—a place where people like Roman would stay. A place I'd stay if I weren't in the middle of a crisis. It's a fortress, guarded by men in suits and a reception desk that undoubtedly holds a guest register I need to see.

I hail a cab that drops me off just outside the front entrance.

I slip into the hotel like a shadow, every step calculated. My eyes scan the place, taking in the exits, the guards, the reception area. When I find an opening—the receptionist is momentarily distracted by a guest's lengthy complaint—I glide past, an unnoticeable blur in a dark corner. The guest logs are right there, on the computer the second receptionist has momentarily abandoned to deal with a phone call.

Flipping through the logs as quickly as the dated system allows, I find what I'm looking for: Roman Nicolaevich, Penthouse Suite. A small surge of triumph rushes through me. My instincts were right, though I'm shocked he's bold enough to use his real name with my brother gunning for him.

I move away, blending back into the crowd before anyone can mark me as out of place. A few minutes later, I'm in the elevator, pressing the button for the top floor. As the elevator ascends, I check my gun, the knives concealed at my waist, the body armor snug under my clothes. I've come prepared for anything, but my heart pounds as the elevator dings, announcing my arrival at the penthouse level.

The door slides open, and I step out, my senses on high alert. For a moment, I stand outside the penthouse suite, knowing whatever happens next could change everything. Roman might be in there; he might not be. My son might be in there; he might not be. My heart might break; it might not.

I knock on the door and step to the side so I can't be seen through the peephole. The door swings open, a slender, beautiful blonde woman standing in front of me. My finger

slips to the trigger guard of my gun, a reflex honed by years of being on edge. The woman's eyes snap up, meeting mine, and I see her hand subtly reach for something hidden behind her back.

In an instant, we both have our weapons drawn, two barrels in a silent conversation. Tension fills the room like smoke, thick and suffocating.

“Who are you?” I demand, my eyes locked onto hers.

“I should be asking you that question,” she replies, icy cool but with a razor edge.

The situation is precarious. One wrong word, one wrong move, and bullets will fly. I weigh my options in the span of a heartbeat.

“Mama?” Ilya's voice slices through the tension.

My eyes dart to his, peeking out from behind the blonde woman, and I see confusion but also recognition. Relief washes over me; he's okay, he's safe.

“Mama, what's going on?”

The room starts to tilt, my vision blurring at the edges. I haven't eaten in hours. And there's also the small matter of whatever the hell else was wrong with me, the nausea, the dizziness that had been plaguing me.

“No, no, no,” I mumble, fighting against the darkness creeping into my vision. “This is not the time.”

I sway on my feet, the gun in my hand growing heavier with each passing second. The blonde woman seems to sense my faltering, her eyes widening a fraction. But I can't focus on her anymore, can't focus on anything but the encroaching darkness and the panicked voice of my son, calling out for me.

Then the world slips away.

## CHAPTER 28

VALENTINA

I regain consciousness on a plush couch, my eyes flicking open to find the blonde woman—Nikita, as she introduces herself—watching me with a mix of wariness and relief.

“You’re awake,” she says, no longer holding a gun but still radiating an air of caution. “I’m Nikita. Roman’s sister-in-law.”

It takes a second for my foggy brain to process what she’s saying, the circumstances that led me here slowly falling back into place. Ilya is here, thank God, watching something on a laptop, headphones covering his ears. My heart clenches at the sight of him, and all I want is to wrap my arms around my little bear and hold him close.

But first, I need answers. “And where is Roman?”

Nikita sighs. “He’s out. Looking for you and preparing for war against your family.”

My heart skips a beat. Before I can say another word, my stomach churns violently, a wave of nausea sweeping over me so quickly there’s hardly time to react.

“Excuse me,” I mumble, scrambling off the couch and rushing toward what I hope is a bathroom. God, this place is like a maze. I find one just in time, emptying the contents of my stomach with a violence that leaves me trembling.

After a minute or so, I splash cold water on my face, staring at my reflection. *What the hell is wrong with you, Valentina?*

I make my way back to the living area to find Ilya staring at me with concerned eyes. “Mama, are you okay? You look sick,” he says, his voice tinged with worry.

I crouch down to his level, brushing a stray curl from his forehead. “I’ll be okay, baby,” I tell him to assuage his fears.

His eyes search my face, as if looking for a hidden answer, but I have none to give him. Something’s off, something I can’t figure out. But for now, my more immediate concern is what this looming ‘war’ means for all of us.

I straighten, locking eyes with Nikita, who’s been observing our mother-son exchange with a kind of quiet respect.

“I need to find Roman,” I say, hoping she’ll give me some hint, something to go on. Because now, more than ever, I feel like finding him is the key to putting my disoriented world back on its axis.

Nikita nods, her eyes meeting mine in a silent understanding. “We all do.”

My gaze shifts back to Ilya, his innocent eyes filled with questions I’m not sure how to answer. Something deep in my gut stirs, a sense of urgency I can’t ignore. We’re running out of time, and every moment counts.

My hand instinctively moves to my stomach, resting there for a moment. I instinctively know what’s going on with me, but I just can’t quite pull it to the forefront just yet.

I’m awash with conflicting emotions. On one hand, the prospect fills me with a joy I can’t quite articulate. I love Ilya more than life itself; there’s no question I could love another child just as fiercely. But this also means complications I can’t afford right now, ones that could put lives at risk.

And the child would be Roman’s.

I swallow hard, imagining his reaction. Would he be elated, terrified? Would he even want to be involved? Hell, we haven’t even defined what ‘we’ are yet, and now this.

It's not exactly safe for me to go out and confirm this with a pregnancy test. Vladimir's men are scouring the city for me, and stepping outside would be a risk for both me and anyone associated with me.

My eyes find Ilya again, happily playing with some toy cars on the floor, blissfully unaware of the storm brewing around us. The thought of him being a big brother brings a small smile to my face, but it fades just as quickly. He's already been through so much. Would adding a sibling to our already complicated life be fair to him? To me? To Roman?

I exhale deeply, the magnitude of the situation sinking in. This isn't just about me anymore; it's about the life that might be growing inside me, about Ilya, about Roman, and the tenuous future we're all staring down.

Nikita is quietly watching me, perhaps picking up on the turbulence swirling within me. "Is everything alright?" she asks, her voice cautious but sincere.

"Complicated," I reply, standing up and pacing a bit. "It's all...very complicated."

She nods, her eyes filled with a knowing wisdom. "Life rarely hands us simple cards, does it?"

"No," I agree, contemplating the multiple layers of complications I'm entangled in. "It doesn't."

With this new potential revelation about a pregnancy, the stakes are even higher, the dangers even more frightening. And yet, somewhere in this twisted mess, there's also the possibility of something beautiful.

I don't know how all these puzzle pieces will fit together, but what I do know is this: I'm going to have to deal with this head-on. And the first step is finding Roman. Because whether I'm ready or not, our lives are now more entangled than ever. And it's time to figure out what that really means for all of us.

I turn to Nikita, who's been silently observing me, her eyes subtly evaluating. "Does the hotel staff run errands for guests?" I ask, my tone casual even though my heart is racing.

“Of course,” Nikita says, a small smile playing on her lips. “Roman bought the place. They’ll pretty much jump if we tell them to.”

Talk about convenient.

I grab my phone from the coffee table and dial the hotel’s front desk. A courteous voice answers, “Good afternoon, this is the front desk. How may I assist you?”

“I need a pregnancy test,” I say flatly, cutting straight to the point. “Discreetly. As soon as possible.”

“Of course, ma’am,” the voice responds, without a hint of surprise or judgment. “It will be delivered to your suite momentarily.”

I hang up and sit back, staring at my phone like it holds the answers to the universe. Except the answer I really need is wrapped in a small plastic package that’s about to arrive and either confirm or dispel my burgeoning suspicion.

My eyes drift back to Ilya, his laughter filling the room as he plays. He seems so happy, so unburdened, a small island of innocence in a sea of complications. My heart aches at the thought of his life being upended once more, this time by a revelation that could either tear us apart or bind us together more closely than ever before.

I pass the next half-hour with my boy, savoring these few precious minutes of peace.

Nikita watches me closely, her gaze unreadable. “Is there anything you’d like to talk about? Sometimes it helps,” she offers.

I consider her words for a moment. There’s a lot to say, yet nothing to say until that small stick dictates the path of my immediate future.

“Thank you, Nikita. But for now, I’d prefer to wait,” I say, my words punctuated by a soft knock on the door.

Nikita moves to answer it, and after a brief exchange, returns holding a small bag. She hands it to me without a

word, our eyes locking for a moment. I take the bag from her, my hands surprisingly steady.

“I’ll be back,” I say quietly, heading to one of the many lavish bathrooms this penthouse suite has to offer.

As I close the door behind me, my fingers wrap around the small box in the bag. I pull it out and stare at it for what feels like an eternity, taking a deep breath to steady myself.

It’s just a small piece of plastic, yet it holds the power to change everything.

I unwrap the box and follow the instructions, then set the stick on the counter and sit on the edge of the bathtub, waiting.

Three minutes never felt so long. My mind races, contemplating the million directions my life could take based on what that stick is about to tell me. Finally, the timer on my phone goes off, jolting me out of my reverie.

I take a deep breath and stand up, turning toward the counter.

## CHAPTER 29

Now that Nikita has told me that Valentina escaped from her brother and is safe and at my hotel, I can concentrate on other pressing matters.

I park the car in a somewhat shabby corner that provides a good sight line of the nondescript building Iosef is apparently calling home in a town called Sinyavino, barely an hour from St. Petersburg. I'm frankly surprised he stayed this close to home, but also relieved I didn't have to travel for hours to find him in the Siberian tundra or someplace equally as difficult to navigate. I can feel Samuil next to me, his body humming with focus and anticipation. He's always been like a human razor blade, sharp and ready to cut through any problem.

I break the silence, "There, that's him." A subtle nod directs Samuil's attention to the man coming out of the building.

Samuil leans closer, narrowing his eyes as he examines Iosef. "You think he'll talk?" he asks, skepticism lacing his words.

"We have ways of making people talk," I reply, but my mind is on Valentina. What does Iosef's reemergence mean for her? For us?

Samuil seems to read my thoughts. "What about Valentina? Where does she stand if we bring him back?"

I exhale, contemplating the unfathomable complexities sure to arise. "One step at a time, Samuil. First, we get to the bottom of why he ran. Maybe it'll offer Valentina some

closure. Besides, if we want any chance against Vladimir, we need to know what we're dealing with here."

"Bold gamble," Samuil remarks, turning his gaze back to Iosef, who is now taking a long drag from a cigarette while fiddling with his phone.

"Life's a gamble," I muse, feeling the weight of each second that ticks by. "But right now, Iosef is our wildcard, and I intend to play it."

Iosef takes one last puff, stubs the cigarette out under his shoe, and retreats back into his sanctuary.

I look at Samuil and ask, "Ready?"

We slide out of the car, blending with the evening shadows, and make our way into the building. Elevators are too conspicuous and too slow, so we take the stairs two at a time.

Finally, we're at his door. I can feel my pulse in my fingertips, that old familiar rush. My hand hovers over my holstered gun. This isn't just another job, another target. This is the man who could hold the key to everything I care about.

I glance at Samuil one last time. He gives me a curt nod, a silent promise of support.

With a surge of adrenaline, I kick the door open. Iosef's eyes widen in shock and confusion, moving from me to Samuil and back again.

I can barely process the man's face before he turns, bolting like a frightened deer. "Hey! Stop running!" I yell, more out of annoyance than necessity. We give chase down the back stairs of the apartment, but the guy's no athlete. It's clear why Valentina was the operative and he was the desk jockey.

We catch him in seconds, Samuil pinning his arms behind his back with a grip that makes him wince. "We didn't come here to kill you, Iosef. Relax," I say, locking eyes with him, trying to read the enigma before me. What the hell did Valentina ever see in this guy?

He looks up, confusion and terror swirling in his eyes. “What the fuck? Who are you?”

“No time for introductions. We’re here for answers,” I say, my tone icy. My patience for this charade has already worn thin.

He snorts nervously, “Answers to what?”

I take a deep breath, clenching and unclenching my fists. This is the man who broke Valentina’s heart, vanished from her life without a trace. I feel a surge of resentment; he’s the reason she built all those walls I’ve been trying so hard to scale.

“I want to know what happened the day before your wedding,” I demand. “Don’t even think about lying. I’ll know.”

Iosef’s body tenses up. “How do you even know about that?”

“I know a lot of things, Iosef. And right now, I want to know why you left Valentina and made her think you were dead.”

For a moment, he looks like he’s about to faint, but he collects himself, clearing his throat. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I left because of personal reasons.”

“Personal reasons?” I almost laugh. “You think you can vanish on the woman you’re supposed to marry because of ‘personal reasons’? You owe her the truth. You owe her closure.”

Iosef looks down, defeated. “You don’t understand. It’s complicated.”

“No, it’s not. It’s very simple. Someone got to you, scared you into leaving. Who was it? “

He looks away, avoiding my eyes. It’s clear he knows something he’s terrified to share, but I’m not leaving until he spills it. Valentina deserves to know, and I’ll be damned if I let this mouse of a man continue to hold her emotional well-being hostage.

“Look, Iosef,” I lower my voice, “right now, you’re in the middle of a war you don’t even know about. The Chechens, my Bratva, me. We’re all fighting for something, and whether you like it or not, you’re part of this. Now, you can continue to hide, or you can help us. Help Valentina. But make your choice fast because time’s running out.”

His eyes flicker to me, then to Samuil, and back to me. I can see him weighing his options, the gears turning in his head.

“Fine,” he finally whispers, “but you have to promise to keep her safe.”

I nod, my face hardening. “That’s something you should’ve done a long time ago, Iosef. But better late than never.”

As I pull out my phone to update the team, I feel a sense of grim satisfaction. This is the breakthrough we needed. But at what cost? What will this mean for Valentina? For us?

Iosef looks at me, his eyes filled with a regret that seems genuine but inadequate given the situation. Finally, he takes a deep breath and starts talking.

“Look, I loved Valentina. I really did. She was everything I could ever want, and the thought of spending my life with her seemed like a dream. But a few days before the wedding, she told me she was pregnant.”

His eyes flicker as if replaying the scene in his mind. “And suddenly, it was like a wall of reality just crashed down on me. Fatherhood, marriage—those were roles I never really thought through. It was as if life suddenly had this gravity I couldn’t escape from. The responsibilities, the expectations—everything scared the hell out of me.”

I cross my arms, controlling my anger but letting him see the edge in my eyes. He hesitates but continues.

“So, I panicked. And in that panic, I made the biggest mistake of my life. I knew I couldn’t call off the wedding. Valentina’s brother is connected to the Chechen mob, for

God's sake. Breaking off with her would have been a death sentence for me, or that's how it felt at the time."

Iosef runs a hand through his hair, obviously conflicted. "I had to make it look like I didn't have a choice, like I was dead. I figured, maybe, that way Valentina could move on without me, without all the mess that would come if I simply left her."

He sighs, shoulders dropping. "I didn't think it through. I didn't consider the repercussions, who would be blamed, or how deeply it would affect Valentina. I acted like a coward, and I've been living with that regret every single day since."

I look at him, forcing myself to remember why I'm here, why I need his confession. Iosef's eyes meet mine, and for the first time, I see a flicker of resolve.

I listen to his confession, my jaw clenched so tight it hurts. My mind is a storm of conflicting emotions. Anger at his cowardice, relief that he's alive and talking, but mostly, sympathy for Valentina. This revelation, coming from the man she was ready to marry, was another betrayal she didn't deserve.

"So, let me get this straight," I say, barely concealing the edge in my voice. "You bailed on Valentina because the thought of being a father scared you shitless? And you thought faking your death would be the best solution?"

Iosef nods, looking miserable but resolved. "Yes. I thought if it looked like I was taken out by a rival gang, then she'd be free and so would I. No one would come looking for me, and I wouldn't be held accountable."

I shake my head, incredulous. "You have any idea what you've done? What your cowardice caused? Valentina's been living a life of hell since you left. You gave her hope, a future, and then you ripped it away. And that's to say nothing of your boy."

Iosef swallows hard, his eyes filled with regret. "I know. I know it was selfish, and I regret it every day. I thought she'd move on, be better off without me. I never thought it would come to this."

I resist the urge to slam my fist into the wall. “Well, it has. Because of you, my Bratva and the Chechens are close to all-out war. Valentina’s a target. Her son’s a target. Hell, even I’ve been dragged into this. Was running away worth all this?”

Iosef looks defeated, his eyes downcast. “No, of course not. If I could take it back, I would. But what can I do now?”

I step closer to him, lowering my voice. “You can start by cooperating. You’re going to explain all of this to Valentina. She deserves to hear it from you, and you owe her the truth. And then you’re going to help us. With your confession, we may be able to prevent a war, but you have to come clean, to everyone.”

He hesitates for a moment before nodding. “Alright. I’ll do it. I’ll cooperate.”

I nod, suppressing a sigh of relief. “Good. That’s the first sensible thing you’ve done in a long time.”

As I step out, a flurry of thoughts whirl in my mind. I’ve gotten what I came for, but at what price? Iosef’s revelation is bound to shatter Valentina, adding another layer of complexity to our already fragile relationship. And then there’s the war, teetering on the edge, its outcome resting on how well we play our cards from here on out.

Iosef was the missing puzzle piece, the key to understanding Valentina’s past. But now, more than ever, I realize solving a puzzle doesn’t necessarily make the picture any less complicated. We have the truth, but whether that will be our salvation or our undoing, only time will tell.

My blood boils as I process Iosef’s confession, a tumultuous blend of anger and indignation churning within me. How could he be so cowardly? How could he just walk away from Valentina, from Ilya, like they were mere collateral damage in his life?

“Samuil, tie him up,” I bark, my voice tinged with a rage I can barely contain.

As Samuil moves toward him, Iosef’s face blanches, and he starts pleading. “Please, don’t kill me. I’m sorry, okay? I

know I messed up, but—”

I cut him off, rolling my eyes in disgust. “Stop your begging. It’s pathetic. We’re not going to kill you. But you are going to face Valentina, and you’re going to confess to her. Everything. No more running away, no more lies. You’re going to own up to what you did.”

Iosef looks at me, a mixture of disbelief and relief washing over his face. He clearly didn’t expect this. I can see him muster a semblance of courage, as if finally realizing he needs to stand up and be accountable for his actions.

Samuil finishes tying him up, giving me a nod to signify he’s secure. He’s now our prisoner, but he’s also a broken man burdened by guilt. In a way, I almost pity him.

But any ounce of pity I might have felt is obliterated when I think about Valentina and Ilya. Valentina, who had to be both mother and father to their son, who had to tell Ilya his father was dead. And Ilya, a bright young boy growing up with a void in his life, a void that should have been filled by a father’s love and guidance.

As I give Samuil the sign to escort Iosef out, I make a silent promise to myself, to Valentina, and even to Ilya. Whatever comes next, I will be there. I will be the man Iosef was too cowardly to be, and I will not run away from the challenges and responsibilities that lie ahead.

And with that conviction burning in my chest, I follow Samuil and Iosef out of the building, ready to set in motion the next phase of this intricate, chaotic drama. One thing is certain: it’s high time for truths to be unveiled, for masks to be taken off, and for wrongs to be righted. And it all starts now.

## CHAPTER 30

**E**motions swirl in my chest—confusion, fear, hope—each fighting for attention and space in my mind. And all the while, the walls of the luxurious room feel like they’re closing in, threatening to crush me in this strange suffocation of gold and velvet.

Nikita’s voice slices through the fog in my head. “You look a million miles away,” she observes. The genuine concern in her voice almost catches me off guard. She continues, “Is there anything I can do?”

“I appreciate your offer, but I don’t know what I need just now.”

A soft smile crosses Nikita’s face, her eyes shimmering as if she knows something I don’t. “Whatever you’re wrestling with,” she says, her voice tinged with a knowing warmth, “I have a feeling you’re going to be more than just okay. You might even find yourself overjoyed, although it may take some time to come to that realization.”

Then, as if cued by fate itself, the phone rings, its shrill tone shattering our shared silence. Nikita moves gracefully, picking up the phone on the second ring. “Yes?” she answers, and as she listens, her eyes widen, a subtle mixture of shock and intrigue flooding her features. “Hold on,” she finally says, her hand covering the mouthpiece.

“It’s for you. Roman wants to speak with you.”

Roman. Just the sound of his name sends a ripple through me, my heart shifting gears from zero to a hundred in a split

second. I rise, my feet carrying me to the phone as if pulled by a magnetic force. My hand trembles slightly as I take the receiver from Nikita.

“Hello, Roman,” I say, steadying my voice as my life becomes ever more unsteady. My words hang in the air, a suspended chord begging for resolution. When has my life ever been stable, predictable? But then again, if it were, would I be me?

The moment Roman’s voice comes through the line, it’s like a shockwave reverberating through my core. It’s not just the pitch and timbre; it’s the haunting undertone, a resonance of something not right. And I know, instantly, that he’s keeping something from me.

“Roman,” I press, “you sound...distant. What’s going on?”

There’s a pause, one that’s too long, filled with too much silence. “I have something important to discuss with you. But it’s a conversation best had face-to-face.”

“Don’t give me that bullshit,” I snap, my words edged like shards of glass. “If something’s going on, I need to know. Now.”

He sighs, and it sounds like the weight of the world is pressing down on him. “Trust me, Valentina. This isn’t a conversation for the phone. You’ll understand why when you see me.”

A jolt of frustration surges through me, hot and fiery. I want to scream, to shake answers out of him through sheer will. What is he keeping from me? My grip on the phone tightens, knuckles turning white. “Roman, I don’t like—”

I’m cut off by a soft sound—a sleepy murmur followed by the patter of little feet against the floor. I turn to see Ilya rubbing his eyes, his face creased with the vestiges of sleep.

“Mama?” he calls softly, tilting his head as if puzzled by the tension he’s walked into.

My heart clenches, and suddenly, the frustration, the anger, the impending sense of doom—they all dissolve, replaced by a swell of love so intense, it’s almost painful.

Roman's voice comes through again, tinged with impatience. "Valentina? Are you there?"

"I have to go," I say, cutting him off, my voice thick with a cocktail of emotions I can't begin to dissect. "We'll talk when you get here, but it better be worth the damn mystery."

Roman is silent for a moment, then finally murmurs, "It will be, I promise."

I hang up, tossing the phone onto a nearby chair, its weight suddenly too much to bear. The device looks innocuous, but it's like a live grenade, a carrier of secrets yet to be revealed.

Ilya tugs on the hem of my shirt, his eyes wide and filled with innocent curiosity. "Mama, who was that?"

Forcing a smile onto my face, I crouch down to his level. "That was Roman, baby. He's going to join us soon."

"Do you know when?" His little voice is hopeful, tinged with an excitement that makes my heart swell.

"Soon," I assure him, pulling him into a hug, burying my face in the crook of his neck. He smells of baby shampoo and pure, untainted innocence.

As I hold my son, my mind races, a cyclone of questions and possible answers spinning wildly. What is Roman hiding? And why do I have the feeling that whatever it is, it's going to tip our already precarious world straight off its axis?

But for now, I push the thought to the farthest corner of my mind. For now, my son needs his mother to be present, to be strong. And that's exactly what I'll be.

My entire body is a taut wire of impatience, vibrating with every second that ticks by. It's like I'm balancing on the edge of a cliff, teetering between two unknowns. Roman's words keep looping through my mind, like a broken record: "It's a conversation best had face-to-face."

Nikita seems to sense the underlying tension, the electricity that's so palpable it's practically visible. "How about some ice cream, Ilya?" she offers, the question clearly aimed at distracting both of us.

I nod, forcing a smile onto my face. “Go on, buddy, it’s a treat.”

Ilya’s face lights up and he follows Nikita into the kitchen. For a fleeting second, I’m left in solitude teeming with questions, anxieties, and secrets. Time passes, Ilya busy with his ice cream, Nikita giving me respectful distance.

And finally, the door opens.

Roman steps through it, his hulking brother Samuil with him. In that moment, my heart leaps in both relief and apprehension. But what catches me off guard is the figure standing timidly behind him—a shadow from my past that’s abruptly been thrust into the glaring light of my present.

Iosef.

My stomach lurches, my mind goes blank, and for a split second, I can’t breathe. Seeing him again is like a punch to the gut, a wound reopened. My eyes dart between the two men, each a polar opposite of the other, each representing a chapter of my life, one closed and one still unwritten.

“Valentina,” Roman’s voice breaks the heavy silence. “We need to talk.”

He notices Ilya, who has wandered back into the room, spoon in hand, eyes wide. Roman seems taken aback, as if the sight of Ilya is a wrinkle in an otherwise carefully laid-out plan.

*Shit.* No doubt he expected the boy to be asleep. Too late to go back. I nod to Roman, indicating for him to continue whatever he had planned. Nikita places her hand on Ilya’s shoulder, guiding the confused boy away from the scene.

Roman turns his attention back to Iosef. “Tell her. Tell her the truth.”

He fidgets, his eyes avoiding direct contact, darting around as if searching for a way out of this reckoning. His fingers tremble and his shoulders hunch, already on the defensive.

“Look, Valentina,” he begins, his voice shaky, “You have to understand, I never intended for things to go this far. I never

wanted to hurt you.” A thin smile stretches across his face, one that begs for understanding, for absolution. “When you told me you were pregnant, I panicked. I was scared, you know? I wasn’t ready to be a father, wasn’t ready to be tied down. You have to see it from my point of view.”

His eyes finally meet mine, as if expecting a nod of agreement, some sign of empathy. But my face remains stone-like, unmoved by his weak entreaties.

“I knew I couldn’t just call it off. Do you know what Vlad would’ve done to me if I’d simply backed out?” His voice rises slightly, tinged with a mix of self-pity and fear. “So I did what I thought was best for me. I faked my death.” Iosef shifts nervously, looking at Roman and then back at me. “I didn’t think it through, okay? I didn’t plan to drag the Bratva or anyone else into it. I just... I took the easy way out because it seemed like the only way.”

His words hang in the air like a dark cloud, a sad testament to his cowardice, his failure to step up when it mattered most. “So, you see, I had my reasons,” he finally mumbles, almost as if he’s begging me to say I understand, that it’s okay.

But it’s not okay. It was never okay. And as I look at him—this ghost from my past who’s suddenly been resurrected—I realize how much I’ve moved on, how far I’ve come. In the end, Iosef’s cowardice, his lack of backbone, only serve to underscore the stark contrast between him and Roman.

My eyes sting, a lump forms in my throat, and for a brief moment, I feel like crumbling. But then, a small voice pierces through the tension.

Ilya. He’s come back into the room.

“I don’t know him,” Ilya says, looking up at Iosef, his young eyes filled with an innocent yet decisive judgment. “I don’t like him.”

“It’s me,” Iosef says. “Your papa!”

I glare at Iosef. “Don’t you dare use that word – you don’t deserve to call yourself such a name.”

“But-”

“The boy is confused enough,” I say. “Don’t add to his troubles.”

My words chasten Iosef. The last thing I want is for Ilya to be thrown for a loop by his father’s arrival.

In one fluid motion, Ilya runs to Roman, who bends down to pick him up, holding him close. A new picture forms before my eyes—one that feels so right, so natural, it’s like an affirmation from the universe itself. Roman and Ilya, standing there together, looking like they were always meant to be father and son. And in that transformative moment, I realize what my gut has known all along.

No matter the secrets, the mysteries, or the fears ahead, Roman is a man who steps up, who takes responsibility, who embraces the challenge. Iosef was a lesson, a painful chapter in a book filled with trials. But Roman—he’s not a chapter. He’s the book, the story, the journey.

I stare at my former love, my eyes narrowing into slits as my mind goes into overdrive. Roman’s right; Iosef needs to man up, and it’s time he faces the consequences. And what better way to mend fences than to offer him to Vladimir, maybe score a peace deal in this spiraling chaos? I pull out my phone, ignoring Iosef’s stuttering questions and terrified face.

I dial Vladimir’s number, and he picks up almost instantly. “Valentina,” he greets, his voice cold and distant. “How did you get out?”

“I have Iosef,” I say, cutting to the chase. “The man who abandoned me and our child. He could be a peace offering, a way to end this madness between us and the Bratva.”

Iosef’s eyes widen to the size of saucers when he hears my offer to Vladimir. “You can’t be serious! Val, listen, I can expl  
—”

His words are cut short when Samuil, standing like a silent sentinel beside him, grabs his wrist in a vice-like grip and shoots him a glare that could freeze lava. Iosef winces, going mute instantly, his pale face a canvas of pure dread.

“Don’t make a sound,” Samuil warns, his voice a low growl, and Iosef nods, swallowing hard.

There’s a pause on the line, so thick I could cut it. “Iosef is dead. You must be mistaken,” Vlad says.

“I’m definitely not mistaken and he’s definitely not dead. He’s standing right in front of me,” I tell my brother.

Another silence ensues. “I don’t care about Iosef,” Vladimir finally says, his voice dripping with contempt. “The Russians have infringed upon our territory, and you’ve turned your back on your own blood. For that, there’s no forgiveness.”

My heart sinks, but not from sorrow—more from the dawning realization that the brother I knew is lost, swallowed whole by vendetta and hate.

“One last chance, Valentina,” he offers, his voice suddenly soft, almost coaxing. “Rejoin us. Kill Roman and come back to your family.”

I look at Roman, who stands with a protective arm around Ilya. They’re watching me, silent but supportive, like two pillars of strength I didn’t know I needed until now.

The answer forms in my mind, clear and resonant, and I almost feel sorry for Vladimir as I say it. “No, I’m where I belong.”

The line goes dead, and I can almost hear Vladimir’s roar of fury echoing in the distance, heralding an escalation, a deepening of hostilities. But as I slide my phone back into my pocket and look at Roman and Ilya, I feel a surge of something potent and unbreakable—a fierce love that’s worth all the risks, all the battles yet to come.

Iosef’s eyes are wide, his body trembling like a leaf in a storm, shocked and scared at the reality he must now face. But my thoughts are no longer with him; he’s a loose end neatly tied up.

“We’ll deal with it, Val,” Roman says, his voice laced with a determination that mirrors my own. I nod, suddenly aware of

the gravity of the choices I've just made but also of their utter rightness.

Vladimir can keep his war; I've got something far more valuable to fight for now.

## CHAPTER 31

ROMAN

“Damien, prep the jet. I want you and Nikita to take Ilya to the safe house in Moscow.” I issue the command into my encrypted phone, pacing around the opulent penthouse suite as I wait for the confirmation on the other end.

“Understood, Roman. We’ll be ready,” Damien replies, concise and clear.

I put the phone back in my pocket and turn to Valentina, who looks like she’s about to erupt like a dormant volcano. I get it. If I were in her shoes, I’d be the same—reluctant to send my son away. But this is the only logical course of action, given the storm brewing.

“No,” Valentina snaps, crossing her arms. “Ilya stays with me.”

“I get where you’re coming from, Val. But right now, we can’t afford to have him anywhere near this impending chaos. It’s too risky.”

Her eyes flash, defiant and protective. But there’s also fear, not for herself, but for her son. “And what if something happens to you, to us, Roman? I can’t bear the thought of him being alone.”

“He won’t be alone. Nikita will be with him, and you’ve seen how well they get along. I have full faith in Damien to protect them both.”

Valentina’s jaw clenches, but I see her eyes soften a fraction. I step closer, cupping her face with my hands, forcing her to look into my eyes.

“Listen, we need to be smart about this. We have to draw the line somewhere between being emotionally led and strategically sound. I want him safe, Val. Away from all this madness.”

For a moment, she looks torn, but then her eyes meet mine, and something in them shifts. She sighs, defeated. “Alright, Roman, do it. But you better make damn sure nothing happens to my son. I’m trusting you, trusting your family.”

I pull her into my arms, embracing her tightly as if my life depends on it. “I promise you, Val. I’ll lay down my life before I let anything happen to him.”

At that moment, Ilya approaches us, a question in his young eyes as he senses the tension. Valentina breaks away from me and goes to him, kneeling to his level.

“Baby, you’re going to go on a small trip with Nikita. Mama and Roman have some very important work to do, okay?”

Ilya looks confused, but then his face lights up at the mention of Nikita. “Nikita? Are we going to eat more ice cream?”

Valentina laughs, a sound so beautiful it undercuts the heaviness of the moment. “Maybe. But you listen to her, alright? And to Damien. They’ll take good care of you.”

Ilya nods, looking a little overwhelmed, but I can see the trust in his eyes. It’s a trust I don’t intend to betray.

As Nikita comes in to take Ilya, prepping him for the trip, I can’t shake off the dread accumulating in my gut. Sending Ilya away rips me apart, but it’s a necessity. For now, we have a war to prepare for, enemies to face, and a future to secure.

And by God, I’ll burn the world down before I let anyone threaten that future.

“Alright, we need to plan our next move,” I declare, guiding her away from the window and toward the table scattered with maps, weapons, and tech gear.

Samuil, Dimitri, and a few other trusted men stand by, ready to take action. Valentina slides into the strategic conversation like she was born for it. It's no wonder—she knows the enemy like the back of her hand.

“We need to hit them where it'll hurt most,” she says, her eyes scanning the maps as she points out several key locations—communications hubs, weapon stockpiles, known meeting points. “We can cripple their supply routes here and here.”

“Val's right,” I say, taking her lead. “If we cut them off from their supplies, it'll make our job a hell of a lot easier. Dimitri, I want you and your team to handle monitoring the meeting locations – eyes on all of them.”

Dimitri nods, the anticipation of action changing the atmosphere in the room. “Consider it done.”

“Samuil,” I turn to my right-hand man, “you take your team and target the hubs. If we can eliminate those, we can disrupt their internal communications.”

Samuil cracks his knuckles. “Been itching for some real action.”

Then I turn to Valentina. “Do you know of any place Vladimir might be? Somewhere he considers safe?”

Valentina's eyes darken, the shift so subtle that if I didn't know her so well, I'd miss it. “There's a hidden location only top-tier members know about. It's the main stockpile of the Chechens in the city, where they keep all their guns and ammo and other supplies. If a war's happening, the gear there is going to be essential.”

“So, what do you suggest we do?” I ask, my eyes fixed intently on hers, giving her the space to make the call.

“We destroy it,” she says with a cold determination that would send shivers down the spine of a lesser man. “We sneak into the warehouse and take it out. If we rip out the beating heart of their logistics, we might be able to end this war before it even starts.”

Her words hang heavy in the room, but I can feel the determination solidifying among us. We're all in, every last

one of us, ready to do the impossible for the sake of our family, our future.

“Alright,” I say, my voice thick with unspoken emotion as I look at Valentina. “Let’s give this place a visit.”

Whatever doubts Valentina might have had about betraying her past, about turning against her own flesh and blood, were extinguished the moment Vladimir threatened the life of her son. And as I see her now—strong, fierce, and utterly resolute—I’ve never been more certain about the future we’re fighting for.

The tension is palpable as we prepare to move out. Men check their weapons, ensuring every mag is full and every safety is off. Valentina straps a Kevlar vest over her frame, sliding a Glock into the holster at her side. I watch her, marveling at how easily she’s embraced the darker part of our world. She looks up, catching my gaze, and for a moment, everything else fades away.

“I have something really important to tell you when we get back,” she says softly, as if she’s sharing a secret meant only for the two of us.

“Then we better survive this,” I reply, my voice tinged with the seriousness only life-or-death situations can bring.

Closing the distance between us, I press my lips to hers. It’s not just a kiss; it’s a promise, a vow to return to each other, no matter what hell we have to go through. As our lips part, I hold her gaze. “I promise we’re going to make it out alive, Val. Trust me.”

She nods and I know she believes me. We’ve been through so much; trust is no longer a question.

“Everyone ready?” I call out, pulling away from her, my eyes scanning the room. The nods and grunts of affirmation echo in the room, filling the space with a renewed sense of purpose.

“Then let’s move out. Today, we show the Chechens what happens when they mess with us.”

Samuil takes point with Dimitri as they head toward one of the fortified strongholds we're targeting. I make my way to the SUV, Valentina at my side, both of us mentally preparing for the task ahead.

The ride is silent, the tension building with every passing mile. But there's also a sense of rightness, a feeling that this is exactly where we're supposed to be. When the warehouse comes into view, shrouded in the darkness of the night, I kill the engine a safe distance away.

"Remember, we're going for maximum damage," I say, checking my weapon one last time.

Valentina nods, her eyes fierce, her posture ready. "Let's do this."

Slipping out of the SUV, I give Valentina a nod, silently signaling for her to follow my lead. The night is our ally, shrouding us in shadows as we navigate toward the warehouse's back entrance. This side of the building is less guarded—a tactical error on their part.

Stealth is key as we make our way closer to the building, our steps muffled by the soft earth beneath us. Reaching the entrance, I pick the lock with practiced ease. We slip inside, the darkness swallowing us whole.

A lone sentry leans against the wall, idly scrolling through his phone, oblivious to what's approaching him. I signal Valentina to wait, and like a wraith, I glide toward the man. Just as he lifts his head, perhaps sensing something amiss, I clamp my hand over his mouth while my other arm snakes around his neck. The chokehold is quick, efficient, and he slips into unconsciousness without much struggle. I lower him to the ground gently, trying not to make a sound.

Valentina gives me a nod of approval, her eyes flickering with the same intense focus filling my veins. We proceed, me in the lead, picking the lock of the side door with swift precision. The tumblers click into place, and we're in.

Inside, the warehouse is a maze of crates and barrels. The air smells like oil and cold metal—the scent of impending

violence. Valentina and I move stealthily between the stacked boxes, making our way toward the central area where the most destructive weapons are stored.

A low conversation reaches my ears; two guards are chatting, their voices tinged with boredom. They're unaware that their routine night is about to take a disastrous turn. Gesturing for Valentina to take the one on the right, I prep my taser gun. We edge closer, hearts pounding but hands steady.

We strike as one—two pops from the tasers, two men crumpling to the floor, incapacitated but unharmed. With a nod, Valentina starts placing the C-4 charges, her movements methodical and precise, just like she's always been in everything she does.

“Three minutes,” she whispers once she's set the timers. “Let's get the hell out of here,” she says, her voice tinged with urgency.

“Hit it,” I whisper, my eyes meeting Valentina's one last time before we step into a new chapter of our lives. But that's for later; right now, it's time to watch the old world burn.

We exit the building just before a deafening explosion erupts behind us, the shockwave lifting us off our feet. The ground shakes, and the night sky is lit with the orange glow of destruction. The warehouse is gone, taking with it the Chechens' chances of a well-armed counterattack.

## CHAPTER 32

Watching the warehouse go up in flames, I feel a strange sense of triumph mixed with something else —relief? Satisfaction? It's hard to say. Roman is watching me, a self-satisfied smirk gracing his features.

“What are you grinning at?” I ask, narrowing my eyes.

“You. You look breathtaking with the fire reflected in your eyes. Like some warrior goddess,” he says, and it's so cheesy, but somehow he makes it work. I chuckle.

“That's a new one. Usually, I'm told I'm intimidating or too intense.”

He leans in, his lips meeting mine in a searing kiss that takes my breath away. “Well, you are those things too. But you're also beautiful, especially when you're conquering the world.”

I can't help but smile back. “We make a good team, you and me.”

The moment shatters with the screeching of tires. I snap my head around to see a convoy of black SUVs roaring down the road, their headlights like the eyes of predators in the night. My blood runs cold.

“Chechens,” Roman says, almost inaudibly. “We need to move, now.”

The spell is broken, and we're back to being soldiers, warriors, whatever the hell we are in this twisted world of ours. We sprint back to our own SUV, parked strategically out

of sight, and Roman fires up the engine before I've slammed my door shut.

As we peel away, leaving behind the smoldering ruins of the warehouse and the arriving Chechens who look equal parts confused and furious, my mind races. We're not out of this yet, not by a long shot. My brother won't stop until he's drawn blood, and now, it seems he's out for both Roman and me.

But as I grip the handle tightly, my knuckles turning white, I glance at Roman and see him focused, his jaw set but his eyes calm, calculating but not panicked. And despite the chaos, despite the danger, it hits me that if I have to be at war, there's no one else I'd rather have by my side.

I know now that Roman will do anything to protect me and my son.

My fingers grip the edge of the seat as Roman swerves onto the cobblestone streets of St. Petersburg, our SUV's engine roaring like some untamed beast. I can see two Chechen SUVs in the rearview mirror, their headlights beaming menacingly through the darkness.

We zoom past the ornate architecture and dimly lit cafes, blending history and modernity in an odd synchrony that only St. Petersburg could pull off. It feels like we're the stars of some action-packed espionage movie, except this is painfully real.

Our SUV skids onto a side alley, flinging murky puddle water into the air. Roman slows down momentarily, letting the Chechen cars believe they're catching up. Suddenly, he guns it.

With a sudden burst of speed, we rocket down the narrow lane, leaving the Chechens bewildered. But not for long. Roman takes another sharp turn onto an abandoned industrial road and kills the lights.

"Get ready," he says, his eyes scanning the road behind us. "And go for the tires."

The first Chechen SUV barrels into sight. I take aim with my pistol, exhaling slowly to steady my hand. A heartbeat

later, I pull the trigger—once, twice. Two perfect shots to the tires. The SUV skids, turning a sharp one-eighty before halting.

“As I said, we make a good team,” Roman remarks, clearly impressed.

“Wait for it,” I say, my focus on the rearview mirror.

The second Chechen SUV comes roaring down the road. I shoot again, and this time, the SUV not only loses its front tire but also skids dangerously close to its incapacitated companion.

“Clean shots,” Roman notes approvingly. “You’re full of surprises, aren’t you?”

“You have no idea,” I reply, holstering my gun.

He revs the engine back to life, and we speed away, leaving behind the stranded Chechens and their crippled vehicles.

For a moment, as we merge back onto the main roads and the adrenaline starts to ebb, I let myself bask in the afterglow of our victory. I’ve dodged death before, but never like this—never with someone who could match my every move, someone who could keep up with me.

“Where to, princess?” Roman teases, bringing me back to reality.

“Take me to your castle,” I reply, my eyes meeting his.

He grins, that irresistible, cocky grin I’m long past admitting I’ve fallen for. “Your wish is my command.”

And as we drive through the veined streets of St. Petersburg, I realize I’ve never felt more alive. If this is what life has in store for me, then let the chase continue. Because for the first time, I’ve found someone worth running with, and perhaps, someone worth running to.

Roman pulls the SUV into the dimly lit parking area of what appears to be a nondescript apartment complex. He kills the engine, and for a moment, we sit in silence, still catching our breath from the night’s exhilarating events.

“Home sweet home,” he says, unbuckling his seat belt and giving me a side glance, “Well, safehouse, sweet safehouse, I should say.”

“Charming,” I say, noting the heavy iron gate and the CCTV cameras discreetly tucked in the corners.

We make our way up a flight of stairs, and Roman unlocks the door to a small but impeccably designed apartment. Modern furniture, minimalist art, and the kind of kitchen you’d expect from someone who enjoys finer things but rarely has the time to appreciate them.

“Would you like a drink?” he offers, moving toward the kitchen.

“Actually, I’d prefer some answers first,” I say, taking a seat on the plush leather sofa.

Roman pauses, his expression serious. “You’ll get them. But before that, there’s something I want to ask you.”

I raise an eyebrow, wondering what could possibly be so important it had to precede the multitude of questions bubbling within me.

Roman sits beside me, takes my hand, and looks me square in the eyes. “Valentina, will you marry me?”

For a moment, I’m dumbstruck. The words hang in the air, almost surreal, given the madness that has been our life recently. But then, another thought invades my mind—uninvited but unmistakable. I’m pregnant.

My heart races, and my stomach churns as memories flood back. The way Ilya’s father left me when he found out about the pregnancy—the way he chose to run away rather than be a man. The same could happen with Roman. If I tell him, would he also flee?

But as I look into Roman’s eyes—steady, committed, and unflinching—I feel a glimmer of hope. This is a man who has gone to war with me, who has seen me at my worst and still chose to stand by my side.

“Do you mean it?” I ask, stalling, trying to gauge the sincerity of his proposal.

“With all my heart,” he replies, gripping my hand tighter as if to punctuate his vow.

My eyes meet his, searching for any hint of doubt or uncertainty. I find none. Roman is many things, but he is not a liar, nor is he a coward. And as my fingers trace the contours of his face, feeling the warmth of his skin, I make my choice—a choice for honesty, for vulnerability, and most importantly, for a future that isn’t dictated by the fears of my past.

“I need to tell you something first,” I start, my voice tinged with a nervous energy I can’t quite hide. “I’m pregnant.”

The room falls silent. Roman’s eyes, usually so easy to read, become an enigma. A million thoughts race through my mind, each worse than the last. But before I can spiral any further, Roman leans in and kisses me—softly, sweetly, and with a kind of conviction that washes away all my doubts.

His eyes are alight with something I can’t quite identify, but it’s beautiful—perhaps it’s joy, hope, or the pure, unfiltered thrill of a future uncharted. For a moment, he just looks at me, as if to memorize my face, this moment, this feeling.

“Then why wait?” he says abruptly. “Marry me. Let’s not waste another second.”

His words wash over me like a wave—intense and unexpected. But the more I think about it, the more it makes perfect sense. We’ve been through hell and back, faced life and death, loved and fought. There’s an undeniable certainty in the chaos that is us.

“I’ve never been surer about anything, Valentina,” he adds, as if reading my thoughts. “You, us, our family—this is my life now. This is what I want. And if you’ll have me, I promise to stand by you, always.”

His conviction, his raw sincerity, leaves me no room for doubt. Roman isn’t just making a spur-of-the-moment

decision; he's making a vow, a commitment not just to me, but to the life growing inside me—to our future.

I look into his eyes, those deep pools of blue that have somehow become my sanctuary in this chaotic world, and my heart knows its answer.

I pull him close, burying my face in his chest. I assume this is answer enough.

He smiles then, a radiant, unabashed smile that lights up his entire face, reaching even his eyes, which seem to sparkle in a way I've never seen before. There's no paperwork, no rings, no witnesses—just two souls pledging themselves to each other in the silent intimacy of a world that belongs only to them.

“Looks like you're stuck with me,” he says, pulling me into a hug so tight it feels like he's trying to meld our bodies into one.

“Likewise,” I reply, wrapping my arms around him, feeling the steady beat of his heart against mine. “But I have to warn you, I come with baggage.”

“I expect nothing less,” he laughs, pulling away just enough to look into my eyes again. “It makes the journey more interesting.”

I laugh too, relieved and delighted at this unexpected turn my life has taken. As I stand there, enveloped in Roman's arms, I can't help but think that maybe, just maybe, the universe has finally decided to cut me some slack. After a lifetime of struggle, betrayal, and endless fighting, I've found my haven, my partner, my love.

“I'm going to be a father,” Roman says softly, almost to himself, as if testing how the words feel on his lips.

We seal this new chapter of our life the way we know best—with a deep, soul-stirring kiss that speaks of tomorrows yet to come, of battles yet to be fought, and of a love that promises to endure it all.

## CHAPTER 33

The video call screen flickers to life, a virtual war room in the palm of my hand. Roman is on one side, focused but visibly impressed by how things are playing out. Andrei and Sandra, the power couple at the helm of the Bratva, are on the other.

“Let’s not mince words,” Andrei begins, “Taking down that warehouse was a stroke of genius. You’ve essentially castrated their supply chain. Vladimir’s on the back foot now, scrambling.”

Sandra chimes in. “They’re in disarray, but they’re not harmless. Wounded animals are the most dangerous. We have a very small window to finish this before they regroup.”

Roman nods, his jaw clenched. “Exactly. The warehouse was a significant part of their operation. Ammo, weapons, and God knows what else. They’ll be looking to recover, but that’ll take time we’re not going to give them. Now’s the time to act.”

I lean into the camera. “And we have the element of surprise. They think they’re running from you, not knowing you’re already ten steps ahead, ready to ambush them.”

Andrei stops pacing and looks at the screen, locking eyes with me. “This could be the decisive strike that not only takes Vladimir off the board but also crumbles the Chechen operations there for good.”

“Agreed,” Roman says. “It’s not just about revenge or even safety at this point. This is a strategic move that will shift the

balance of power permanently.”

I cut in, “And let’s not forget, Vladimir is not just an operator; he’s a symbol. Taking him down will send ripples across the underworld. The statement is that no one’s untouchable.”

Sandra grins, a fierce, wolfish thing. “Oh, I like the sound of that. If we pull this off, it’s not just a win for us. It’s a win for order, for stability. It’s a message to any other would-be challengers that the Bratva isn’t to be messed with.”

I nod. “Let’s get to the plan.”

Andrei smirks. “Go ahead.”

“He’s got three main routes,” I announce, cutting straight to the point. “Knowing Vladimir, he’s going to try to cross the Finnish border.”

Andrei raises an eyebrow, clearly pleased. “You seem to have your brother figured out.”

“Not just my brother,” I reply sharply. “His entire damn operation. I know every trick he might have up his sleeve.”

Sandra leans into the frame, her eyes filled with a kind of professional glee I’ve come to appreciate. “I have to say, Roman, she’s good at this.”

Roman shoots me a sideways glance, a glint of pride in his eyes. “I already knew that, but it’s nice to hear it from someone else.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I roll my eyes with a smile. “Save the flattery for later. Right now, we have a snake to catch.”

Andrei leans back, visibly impressed. “Alright, Valentina, you’re calling the shots on this one. Where do we set up our nets?”

I point out the coordinates on the map. “These three intersections are crucial. If we put men here, here, and here, we can block all his possible exits and channel him into this stretch of road.” I highlight a road leading to the Finnish border. “This is the most nondescript road he can use to get out of the country. He’ll plan to head to Helsinki and link up with

his contacts there and plan his counteroffensive. We get him now, or we likely don't get him at all. And this is the place to do it."

"Textbook pincer movement," Andrei nods appreciatively. "Sandra, alert our teams. Let's get this done."

Sandra moves away, presumably to deliver instructions. Andrei turns back to the screen. "You're sure he'll be alone?"

I snort. "Vladimir? Never. He'll have guards, probably his best. But they'll be expecting a fight from the outside, not realizing they're walking into a trap. If we can overwhelm them with numbers, surround them completely, they might choose to give up rather than throw their lives away."

"Excellent," Roman says. He turns to me, his eyes softening for just a moment. "After this, it's over. He won't be able to touch us or anyone we care about again."

I look at him, touched by the raw sincerity in his words. "I'm counting on it."

"Then let's finish this," Andrei announces. "See you on the road."

The video call ends, the screen going black. But instead of darkness, all I see is the light at the end of a very long, painful tunnel. We're soon on the road, and I turn to Roman, his hands on the wheel and his eyes on the road.

"Ready to end this?" he asks.

"More than you know," I reply, a maelstrom of emotions swirling inside me—relief, anticipation, but most of all, an overpowering sense of impending freedom. After tonight, the ghosts of my past would finally be laid to rest. And in their place, a new life would begin with Roman, with Ilya, and our unborn child.

The engine purrs like a predator as Roman navigates through the labyrinthine streets of St. Petersburg. The darkness outside provides a cloak for our movements, but the tension in the car is as thick as fog.

“How are you holding up?” Roman asks, his eyes never leaving the road.

I consider my response carefully. Inside, my emotions are doing somersaults—a bizarre circus act of fear, excitement, and some unnameable feeling that only comes when you’re about to gamble everything you hold dear. But I’m not about to share all that.

“I’m fine,” I say, the lie sliding smoothly off my tongue.

Roman glances at me, and for a moment, our eyes lock. It’s brief but intense, and I feel as if he’s peering right into the chaos in my soul. Yet he doesn’t push, doesn’t probe. There’s just this silent acknowledgment that he sees far more than I’ve told him. The fact that he could read me so easily is both electrifying and terrifying. I shove the thought aside; now’s not the time.

We’re an hour and a half into our drive when Andrei’s voice crackles through the car’s Bluetooth system, breaking the silence. “We’ve got him. Vladimir’s trapped on a desolate stretch near the Finnish border. It’s a complete blockade.”

Roman grins, a predator sensing the imminent capture of his prey. “Good work, Andrei. We’re on our way.”

Twenty minutes later, we arrive at the location. The road ahead is barricaded with heavy-duty Bratva vehicles, their headlights forming an intimidating halo of light in the night. Samuil and Leo pull up in a car behind us, grim determination etched on their faces. Andrei and Sandra stand among their soldiers, guns drawn.

Vladimir has his own men, but he’s vastly outnumbered, and the looks on the faces of his retinue suggest they know well we hold their lives in our hands.

We step out of the car. The atmosphere is electric, charged with grim anticipation. Samuil approaches, his eyes meeting mine briefly before focusing on Roman.

“Everything is set,” he reports.

Roman nods. “Once we take Vladimir, we end this chapter for good.”

I take a deep breath, readying myself for what's about to happen. All the planning, the strikes and counterstrikes, they all lead to this moment. We're on a knife's edge, the future hanging in precarious balance.

As I stand there in the blinding headlights, next to the man who's managed to tear down the walls I've spent years building, the weight of the upcoming confrontation settles in. Vladimir isn't just my brother; he's a part of my past, a link to the life I used to have, a life I'm on the cusp of leaving behind for something unknown yet potentially beautiful.

I feel Roman's hand slip into mine, his grip firm but gentle, as if he's trying to offer me the strength to face what comes next. And in that moment, surrounded by the looming darkness and glaring lights, I realize that whatever the outcome, this is a point of no return. For Vladimir, for me, for the Bratva—and for whatever it is blooming between Roman and me.

As we lock eyes, Vladimir's voice rises in pitch, dripping with a malice so potent it could almost be physical. "You think you can stop me? Do you? I'll take down every last one of you. Starting with you, my dear sister."

His words hang in the air, acrid and vile, lacing the atmosphere with an unmistakable sense of menace. "I'll ruin you. I'll ruin your son, and this pretty boy you're so smitten with. You think you're safe with these Russian dogs? They're lambs compared to the wolves I'll send after you."

He steps forward as if to make his point more clearly, his finger jabbing in the air as if it were a weapon. "I'll make sure you all suffer. You'll pray for death, but it won't come. Not for a long, long time."

His eyes are alight with the ferocity of his convictions, as if he could will his threats into existence through sheer force of personality. He's so engrossed in his own vindictiveness he doesn't notice my hand slipping to the gun at my side.

Roman stands stoic beside me, but the muscles in his jaw twitch. He's holding back, giving me room to make the call. He trusts my judgment, but the air is thick with tension, each

second ticking by like an hour. It's clear to everyone present that my next move will decide the course of events.

Vladimir stands there, encircled by cars, his face twisted in rage and disbelief. His men are backing away slowly, silently surrendering. A look of pure loathing is etched into Vladimir's eyes, and the way he's staring at me, it's like he's trying to incinerate me on the spot.

"You treacherous bitch," he snarls, his voice venomous. "You turn your back on your own flesh and blood for them?" His gesture encompasses Roman, Samuil, Leo, the rest of the men—the whole Bratva.

"For the life of my son, I would turn against the devil himself," I shoot back. "You forfeited your claim as family the moment you threatened his life."

Vladimir laughs, a mocking, ugly sound. "Do you think they'll protect you? The Bratva? They're nothing like us."

"Last chance, Vladimir," I say, my voice ice-cold. "Take everything back, walk away, disappear. I won't hunt you down."

My hand finds the gun holstered at my side. Roman watches me but says nothing. He knows the score. This is my call, my closure.

Vladimir sneers, spitting on the ground. "So long as I breathe, I will make sure you and that bastard son of yours live lives more wretched than the lowest worms. You can't stop me."

"Wrong answer," I say, my voice calm but loaded like the chamber of the gun I raise.

Vladimir's eyes widen for a split second, realizing the gravity of his mistake too late. "You can't be serious. My own sister wouldn't kill—"

"I'm not your sister anymore," I interrupt him, locking eyes one final time as my finger moves to the trigger. "I'm the Ghost."

The shot rings out, echoing in the empty space around us. Vladimir crumples to the ground, life extinguished in an instant. The road is awash in a silence so profound it's almost surreal, shattered only by the sound of a spent shell casing hitting the pavement.

As Vladimir's lifeless body hits the ground, I feel a strange sense of finality. It's not triumph; it's closure. A dark chapter has come to an end, but at a cost I'm still reckoning with as I lower my weapon.

Roman steps closer to me, placing a hand on my shoulder, offering silent comfort and approval. I glance at him, a mute conversation transpiring in the span of a heartbeat. It says, "We did what we had to do."

The lingering smell of gunpowder fades into the background as Roman's arms wrap around me. His embrace is the tether pulling me back from the precipice of emotions threatening to consume me. I don't even need to say anything; Roman just knows.

"I'll handle the cleanup. Go back to the hotel, call Nikita and Ilya. You've done enough," he whispers, his breath warm against my ear.

I nod, welcoming his words but not entirely convinced I've "done enough." Sometimes doing what's necessary leaves an aftertaste, a residue no amount of reasoning can wash away.

I get into the car, gripping the wheel with the realization that it's over. Vladimir's reign, the fear he instilled, the cloud that had been hanging over us—it's all gone. I take a deep breath, filling my lungs as if I'm inhaling freedom for the first time.

Driving back to the hotel, my thoughts drift to Ilya. My beautiful, innocent boy who deserved none of this chaos. I quicken my pace, eager to see him, to reassure myself with the sight of him sleeping peacefully.

Upon arriving at the hotel, I FaceTime Nikita. She answers, and the look on her face suggests she understands the gravity of the evening's events.

“All done?” she asks.

I nod. “Yeah, all done.”

She smiles. “Good. Ilya is sleeping, belly full of ice cream. I can send you pictures of the little man.”

I smile. “Thank you, but it can wait until morning. Let one of us get some rest, at least.”

“Of course.”

“Thank you, Nikita.”

“The pleasure is mine.”

The call ends.

Left alone in the room, exhaustion washes over me like a tidal wave. Only now do I realize how heavy my bones feel, how desperately my body and soul are crying out for rest. I crash into the bed, but sleep is elusive, skirting around the edges of my consciousness.

Every creak of the door, every rustle of leaves outside keeps me awake. I’m waiting for Roman. I need to see him, to feel him, to know he’s real—that we are real and the world we’re about to build is not some fragile dream.

Finally, the door opens softly. I sit up immediately, my eyes locking onto Roman’s as he steps into the room. His eyes search mine, as if asking for permission, and in that second, all walls come down.

We meet halfway, our lips crashing in a passionate kiss that speaks volumes.

As I pull away, looking into Roman’s eyes, I feel it: Home. A sense of belonging, of finality, of endless possibility.

## CHAPTER 34

**A**s I hold Valentina in my arms, the gravity of our recent choices and actions sinks in. But instead of a burden, it feels like a mantle—a commitment we've taken upon ourselves, a destiny we've chosen. Love can be a complicated thing, fraught with insecurities and imperfections. But in this moment, as I feel her heartbeat against my chest, it seems exceedingly simple.

My phone vibrates softly on the coffee table, the sudden noise piercing the comfortable silence. I reach for it, seeing a text from Nikita. My thumb glides over the screen to reveal pictures of Ilya. He's sleeping, bundled in a blanket, looking every bit the angel he is. A warmth fills my chest as I read the accompanying text. *He's safe and sound. No worries.*

I share the pictures with Valentina, her eyes lighting up momentarily at the sight of her son. But I can also sense the undertow of emotions she's grappling with. Her eyes have that far-off look, as if she's wading through a complicated internal landscape.

My instinct is to probe, to offer a listening ear. But as I gaze down at her, I realize that maybe what she needs right now is not words, but silence.

So, I pull her closer, tightening my hold as if by doing so I can shield her from the ghosts of her past, from the specter of choices that were difficult to make. My hands slide into her hair, my fingers weaving through the silky strands as I plant a soft kiss on her forehead. In return, she nestles closer, her hand splayed across my chest, right over my heart.

I think about the path that led us here, the obstacles we've overcome, the battles we've fought—both within and without. It's not an easy love, but it's real, palpable, worth every struggle and every sacrifice. It's the kind of love that comes once in a lifetime, that changes the trajectory of your existence, that makes you reevaluate what you thought you knew about life, about yourself.

I realize she's not just someone I want for a week, a month, or a year. She's someone I want for a lifetime, through the ups and the downs, in the moments of stark clarity and the days mired in complexity. And as we sit there, the world outside retreating into a meaningless blur, I know she feels the same.

A sigh escapes her lips, a small yet profoundly eloquent sound that seems to say, "I'm here, and I'm staying." It's enough.

As the comforting silence stretches between us, I realize there's one thing we haven't exactly settled yet. A smirk curls my lips as I lean back slightly, looking into Valentina's eyes.

"You know, you never officially said yes to my proposal."

Her laughter fills the room, rich and genuine. The sound never fails to ignite something warm and invigorating within me.

"That's classic Roman—always assuming you've got it in the bag," she quips, her eyes twinkling with humor and something more elusive, something intimate that only the two of us understand.

"Well, can you blame me?" I say, feigning innocence but unable to hide my grin. "I mean, I do usually get what I want."

Her eyes meet mine, dancing with a mixture of mischief and sincerity. "Oh, I've got an answer in mind. But for that, I need you very close."

As if pulled by an invisible force, our lips meet in a passionate kiss. It's not the first we've shared, but there's a palpable difference—a promise in the press of her lips against mine, an oath in the way my arms tighten around her. The

complexities of our lives, the weight of our past decisions, they all seem to melt away, leaving only this beautiful simplicity.

Finally, we break away, a few short inches separating us, but the emotional distance has been obliterated.

“So,” I say, my voice low but tinged with excitement, “is that close enough for my answer?”

Valentina smiles, her eyes soft but filled with a fire that I’ve come to love, to cherish. “More than close enough,” she says softly. “Yes, Roman, a thousand times yes.”

The moment our lips meet, the world dissolves around us. It’s just Valentina and me, locked in an intimate bubble I never want to burst. As she starts unbuttoning my shirt, her touch sparks a fire in me that’s impossible to put out. I reciprocate, letting her shirt slide off to join mine on the floor.

Damn, she’s beautiful—like something out of a dream. Her skin, bathed in the soft glow of moonlight streaming in through the window, is a canvas that draws me in. And it’s not just the allure of her body; it’s the magnetic pull of who she is—her vulnerability matched with an unbreakable strength. I can’t resist; I move to lay above her.

Her touch guides me, but it’s more than physical guidance; it’s as if she’s guiding my very soul. My fingertips on her skin send electricity coursing through me, jolting me awake in ways I never thought possible. When her legs wrap around me, drawing me closer, pulling me inside, it’s like she’s pulling all the fragmented pieces of me back together, making me whole.

With every ounce of honesty in me, I whisper, “I love you, Valentina.”

My soul feels lighter, like a weight has lifted. This love, this connection—it’s something I’m willing to fight for. Whatever battles await us, whatever challenges are thrown our way, I know we’ll face them as a united front. In the stillness of this intimate night, I’m more certain of this than anything I’ve ever known. She’s my sanctuary in a life of chaos, and I’ll do whatever it takes to protect that.

We move together in perfect harmony and let go together as well, riding the high of our love.

Lying there beside her, our breaths slowing in unison, I marvel at the serendipity of it all. From the chaos and violence that colored both our pasts, we've stumbled into this surreal reality.

"Can you believe this?" I say, brushing a stray strand of hair away from her face. "It's like life decided to give us a break—a really, really good break."

She chuckles softly, her eyes dancing. "You're telling me. A few months ago, the idea of peace was just a distant concept. And now, it's a reality. With you."

I pull her closer, my arm wrapped around her waist, as if by holding her tight, I could anchor us to this beautiful moment. "I keep thinking about our future, you know? This is just the beginning for us. There's so much more out there for us to explore together—a lifetime's worth."

"Yeah, and not just the two of us," she adds, a gleam of joy lighting up her eyes. "We're going to be parents, Roman. Can you imagine?"

A sense of awe washes over me. Parents. The word carries so much weight, so much responsibility, yet I find myself excited rather than overwhelmed. "I can imagine, and it's incredible. When I think of you as the mother of my child, I swear, my heart feels like it's going to explode with happiness."

Her fingers trace the tattoo on my arm as she speaks, "And you, as the father of our child? I can't think of anyone more protective, more dedicated."

The room falls silent, but it's the kind of silence that speaks volumes—the kind that's comfortable, reassuring, full of promise. My fingers find hers, our hands interlocking, and it strikes me how perfectly they fit. Like two pieces of a puzzle finally clicking into place.

"I love you, Valentina," I murmur, my eyes never leaving hers.

“I love you too, Roman,” she replies, her voice tinged with an emotion so pure, so true it makes my chest tighten.

As I draw her in for another tender kiss, I know these three words, simple as they may be, carry the weight of our entire future—a future that, for the first time in both our lives, looks infinitely bright. And as her lips meet mine, sealing our fates together, I make myself a silent promise.

No matter what comes our way, I will love this woman—this extraordinary woman—for all the days of my life.

## CHAPTER 35

Three months have passed like the snap of fingers, yet they've been the most transformative of my life. The streets of St. Petersburg, once a battleground, have quieted under the grip of the Antonov-Nicolaevich Bratva. I survey the skyline from my office, the city stretching out as if it's bowing in submission. We've taken over the territory that was once a constant threat, and peace isn't just a theoretical concept anymore; it's the state of things.

My phone buzzes on the desk, breaking my reverie.

"Hey, little brother," Andrei greets as I pick up. "How are things on your end?"

"Stable," I reply, leaning back in my chair. "Very stable. Mercifully stable, in fact. You?"

"We're doing great here in Moscow – nice and quiet."

"Quiet is good."

"I miss the family. We've been talking about visiting soon."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," Andrei says, getting straight to the point as he always does. "You've accomplished what you set out to do in St. Petersburg. Why don't you come back to Moscow for good? We can easily appoint one of our trusted lieutenants to oversee the operations there."

I pause. It's tempting—returning to the familiarity of Moscow, back to the heart of our empire. But something

within me resists the idea.

“I’ve been thinking, Andrei,” I begin cautiously, weighing each word. “I want to stay here, in St. Petersburg. I want to oversee this territory personally, make it as great as it can be.”

A silence lingers on the other end of the line, and for a moment, I wonder if I’ve caught my ever-unflappable brother off guard.

“You’re serious about this,” he finally says.

“Very serious,” I confirm. “Valentina and I... we’re starting a family. I want my child to grow up here, in a place where I’ve personally ensured stability and peace. It’s not just about business anymore; it’s personal.”

Andrei sighs, but it’s a contented one. “Well, I can’t argue with that. Especially if it means you’re finally settling down. God knows, it’s about time.”

I chuckle. “I guess I’ve always been a slow learner.”

“You said it, not me,” he retorts, a smile evident in his voice. “You’re going to be missed, Roman, but I hope you know you’re always welcome back home. We’ll keep the samovar hot for you.”

“We’ll visit often,” I assure him. “You won’t be able to get rid of us that easily.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he says. “Take care, little brother, and give my regards to Valentina and Ilya.”

“I will,” I say before hanging up.

As I set the phone down, I find myself enveloped in a moment of deep, contemplative silence. I look out the window once more, my gaze falling on the city that’s now mine—a city that, in many ways, has also claimed me.

But it’s not just the bricks and mortar that hold me here; it’s the life burgeoning within these walls. A life where Valentina and I will raise our child, where we’ll navigate the labyrinthine complexities of parenthood together. A life that’s as far removed from the violence and chaos of our pasts as it could possibly be.

I find myself thinking about Valentina, about the words we exchanged just a few months ago—words of love, of commitment. And as I prepare to leave my office, eager to return to her, I realize that St. Petersburg isn't just another territory we've conquered; it's the beginning of a whole new chapter.

As I walk away from my desk, my heart feels lighter than it has in years. I leave the door to my office slightly ajar, knowing it's not just a room filled with papers and phone calls. It symbolizes a part of me, a part I can now leave behind each day when I return home to my family. And speaking of home, I can't help but smile as I step into our new living room.

This isn't just a house; it's a sanctuary that I bought for Valentina, Ilya, and our unborn daughter. The thought of having a little lady fills me with a joy so pure, so untainted, it's almost surreal. I can't wait to welcome her into the world, to hold her in my arms, to protect her.

Our home stands in one of St. Petersburg's quieter neighborhoods, a quiet place amid the hustle and bustle of the city. It's a two-story house, elegantly designed with a mix of classic and modern architecture Valentina and I both love. The façade is a warm, earthy tone, blending seamlessly with the greenery of our well-manicured lawn and the mature trees framing the property.

Valentina looks up from the couch, where she's pouring over paint swatches and nursery designs. "You look like you're on cloud nine," she remarks, her eyes gleaming. "What happened?"

I sit beside her, pulling her close. "I've just been talking to Andrei. I told him we're staying in St. Petersburg. He's good with it. More than good, actually."

She smiles, her hand lightly touching her abdomen. "I think we're making the right choice, Roman."

I kiss her forehead. "I know we are. So, what are we thinking for the nursery? Pink or lavender?"

Valentina chuckles. “Why limit ourselves to traditional gender colors? How about a soft, neutral gray? Then we can accessorize with colors as she grows up and develops her own likes and dislikes.”

I nod, absolutely smitten by how thoughtful she is. “You’re right. She should be free to choose. Gray it is. It’s neutral yet elegant.”

“We also need to think about baby-proofing this place,” Valentina adds. “Our careers don’t exactly scream kid-friendly environment.”

That makes me laugh, but I know she’s serious. Our lives are anything but ordinary, which means our children’s safety is even more crucial.

“Right,” I agree. “The weapons locker in the study will be upgraded to a biometric lock, only accessible by our fingerprints. Plus, we’ll install some cameras and sensors around the house. Nothing too invasive, just enough to alert us if anything is off.”

Valentina nods, clearly pleased with my suggestions. “You’re going to be a great dad, Roman. Our daughter is lucky to have you.”

“I could say the same about her mother,” I reply, overwhelmed by a rush of emotions. “We’re going to be a great team, Valentina. For her and for Ilya.”

She leans in to kiss me, a kiss that isn’t just an expression of love but a sealing of a pact, a pledge we are in this journey of parenthood together. It’s a profound moment, so simple yet so deeply significant.

We spend the next hour discussing more details—everything from which brand of crib to buy to what kind of stories we want to read to our daughter at night. Each conversation, each decision, builds a future I once thought was out of reach for someone like me. But here it is, within grasp, more vivid and promising than ever.

As I revel in these reflections, the front door bursts open with youthful exuberance. Ilya dashes in, his school bag

bouncing on his back, a wide grin on his face. “Papa, can we go to the playground? The new one you made just for me?” He’s practically vibrating with excitement, his eyes twinkling. “And can we get ice cream?”

I look at Valentina, who returns my smile. “Of course, buddy. Let’s all go. Mama, what do you think?”

Valentina gets up from the sofa, her eyes meeting mine. “I think we all deserve some fun. Ice cream and the playground sound like the perfect day.”

As we prepare to head out, my mind briefly drifts to Iosef. He went right back into hiding after everything went down with Vladimir and the Chechens. So much the better, I think. His disappearance removes yet another potential complication, making our new life here in St. Petersburg even more secure.

We drive to the playground, and it fills me with pride to see Ilya’s eyes widen as he takes in the colorful slides, swings, and the jungle gym. This is a new addition to the neighborhood; part of the community development projects I’d initiated. Built to top-notch standards, it’s the kind of place I wish I could have played in as a kid. Ilya rushes out of the car before it’s even fully parked, making a beeline for the swings.

Valentina and I follow at a more leisurely pace, hand in hand. “You really outdid yourself with this playground,” she remarks, her eyes following Ilya as he navigates the jungle gym with the agility of a little monkey.

“It’s all for him, and for the little one on the way,” I say, placing my hand gently on her growing belly. “And for you. For us. This is the start of something beautiful.”

She leans in and kisses me softly, her lips lingering on mine for a moment that feels like an eternity. “I love you,” she whispers.

“And I love you, more than I can ever express,” I respond, my voice tinged with a gravity I’ve only ever felt with her.

As we sit there, watching Ilya laugh and play, I realize this is what I’ve always wanted but never knew I needed: a family of my own, a loving wife, children who look up to me, and a

community I can nurture just as it nurtures us. And it's all unfolding here, in a city we've made our home, under a sky that promises nothing but endless possibilities.

I look over at Valentina again, and she catches my gaze. We both know we've come a long way, battling obstacles and defeating odds that seemed insurmountable. And yet here we are, victorious in love and life, and excited for the chapters yet to come.

"We did good, didn't we?" she asks, a teasing tone in her voice.

"We did excellent," I affirm, squeezing her hand. "And the best is yet to come."

As I watch my son making new friends, as I sit next to the love of my life, as I contemplate the family growing both in size and in love, I realize that for the first time in a long, hard, tumultuous life—I am truly, deeply, unequivocally happy. And that happiness isn't a fleeting moment; it's a lifetime that's just beginning.

## EPILOGUE I

**Two years later...**

**T**he pattering rain offers a lullaby to the city, washing away the grime and the memories of the past. It's late, way past the bedtime I've become accustomed to since embracing this new chapter of my life. Ilya is fast asleep in his room, the events of his first day at school no doubt playing in his dreams. Roman is away on business, one of the few times we're not side-by-side, ruling our little empire. It's just me and the storm.

I step over to the window, the elegant drapes Roman insisted on framing my view. I look out over the city that has offered me so much—pain, yes, but also a fresh start. St. Petersburg is our city now. Roman has used his money, charisma, and more than a little intimidation to not only rule but genuinely improve the area. Our neighborhood is proof enough of that. Streets once mired in crime are now teeming with life and prosperity, courtesy of Roman Antonov-Nicolaevich.

I may no longer don the guise of the Ghost, but I've found new purpose as Roman's head of security. He insisted, of course. Said he could think of no one better to trust his life with. The irony isn't lost on me, but I accepted the role without hesitation. My days are spent balancing the demands of motherhood and the duties of my new position, a fine line I've somehow managed to walk. Mother by day, protector by night. And I wouldn't have it any other way.

The rain intensifies, droplets pounding the glass like a thousand miniature drumbeats. It should be a lonely night, yet I find solace in the solitude, a moment to breathe, to think.

I set the phone down and watch the storm-soaked city, feeling like the luckiest woman in the world. There may still be threats out there, lurking in the shadows, but let them come. We're the Antonov-Nicolaevichs, a family built on love, resilience, and a touch of ruthlessness. And nothing is going to break us.

The storm rages on, but inside, all is calm. I head back to bed, the rain's rhythm melding with the beat of my own hopeful heart.

I tiptoe through the dim hallway, careful not to wake Ilya. The wood creaks slightly under my feet, a familiar sound that's now a part of my home. Pushing open the door to Milenoë's nursery, I have to stifle a laugh. There's Roman, wedged into a crib meant for our one-year-old daughter. His tall frame is twisted into a comical shape to fit with Milenoë nestled against his chest, her tiny body calm and quiet.

Roman looks up, his eyes catching mine. "She was crying. It was the fastest way to get her back to sleep," he whispers, a mix of childish guilt and dad-pride on his face.

I lean over the crib, softly touching Milenoë's tiny head. "You're ridiculous," I tell him. The words are teasing, but the warmth in my voice is unmistakable.

"I've been called worse," he replies softly, his eyes twinkling in the room's low light.

I shake my head and sit down on the rocking chair beside the crib. "You could've just picked her up. We have perfectly good rocking chairs."

"And miss the chance to innovate in the realm of parenting?" he grins, finally easing himself out of the crib with a series of contortions that would put a gymnast to shame.

As I watch him, it hits me again just how much I love this man. A part of me—the very core that was once walled away, untouchable—feels unspeakably tethered to him. That love has

grown, encompassing two more lives that came from us, from this love.

I glance at the digital clock on the dresser. “It’s late. Come to bed.”

Hand in hand, we leave the nursery. I feel a sigh slip from my lips. There was a time when the night was my ally, a cloak for my operations as the Ghost. Now, it’s different. The darkness is a backdrop for irreplaceable, quiet family moments like this one.

Roman’s fingers tighten around mine. “Everything okay?”

I look up at him. Our eyes meet, and in that moment, it’s as if an entire universe of unspoken words is exchanged. “Yes,” I whisper, “everything is more than okay.”

I slip under the covers, relishing the warmth and the feel of Roman beside me. He turns his head and gives me that look, a smoldering glance I’ve learned to read all too well.

“So, where were we before we were so rudely interrupted by thunder and parental duties?” he asks, leaning in to capture my lips in a kiss that’s as soft as it is electrifying.

The world narrows down to this moment, to the sensation of his lips moving against mine, to the warmth radiating from him and enveloping me. My fingers tangle in his hair, drawing him closer.

Just when it seems like we’re about to forget about the world outside this bedroom, another rumble of thunder rolls through the sky. The atmospheric percussion is quickly followed by a high-pitched wail from Milenoë’s room.

Roman groans and drops his forehead to mine. “Timing,” he mutters, half in frustration, half in amusement.

“Yeah, your daughter has impeccable timing,” I say, tracing a line down his cheek with my thumb.

He pushes off the bed, the springs creaking in mild protest. “I’m on it,” he assures me, heading for the door. But just before exiting, he turns and shoots me a playful grin. “This

time, I'm bringing a pillow for myself. No more crib gymnastics tonight."

My laughter follows him out of the room, a lighthearted echo in the midnight air. With another fond shake of my head, I settle back into the pillows, listening to the gentle pitter-patter of rain on the windows. I can't help but marvel at the domesticity of it all.

It's a far cry from the nights filled with danger and subterfuge, from the times when every shadow could have been an enemy, every sound a signal of doom. And though those elements are still present—hazards that come with our particular line of work—the dangers outside seem less ominous when countered by the sanctuary we've built within these walls.

As I lie in the dark, my thoughts drift to Roman. His quick wit, his unshakable support, and the love he's not afraid to show. For our kids, for me. It makes me think that, even in a world fraught with peril and uncertainty, some things are worth risking it all for.

Another peel of thunder rolls through the sky, softer this time, as if it too has been subdued by the serenity filling our home. And even though I can hear the soft lullabies Roman sings to Milenoë through the baby monitor, I know he'll be back. With a pillow under his arm and love in his eyes. And when he returns, I'll be here, ready to pick up right where we left off—unfinished kisses and all.

For now, though, I close my eyes and let myself drift in the soothing sounds of rain and distant lullabies, comforted by the thought that even when life's storms rage the loudest, we've built something unbreakable together. And as I teeter on the edge of sleep, I can't help but feel grateful for this perfect, imperfect life we've created.

I can't wait to see what tomorrow brings.

## EPILOGUE II

**Thirteen years later...**

“**A**lrigh, son, hands at ten and two,” I instruct, trying to maintain a calm facade despite my own bubbling nerves.

Time has a way of slipping through your fingers, of turning the unimaginable into everyday reality. It seems like just yesterday Ilya was a boy, stumbling around the living room, his eyes wide with wonder at the world around him. And now here he is, seventeen years old, tall and strong, sitting nervously in the driver’s seat of a car. It’s a rite of passage, a symbol of independence and maturity. But as his father, it’s a moment that fills me with a confusing cocktail of pride, excitement, and trepidation.

Ilya’s hands hover over the steering wheel, hesitating as if it’s a live snake. “Are you sure about this, Papa? Maybe I should take some professional lessons first.”

“Nonsense,” I retort, injecting humor into my tone. “You’ve got the best instructor in all of Russia right here. Besides, who’s going to teach you how to properly evade pursuit and execute high-speed maneuvers? A driving school?”

He chuckles, visibly relaxing. “I’m not sure those skills are part of the regular curriculum.”

“Exactly,” I quip. “Alright, first thing’s first. Foot on the brake.”

His foot descends on the pedal, tentative but steady. Good.

“Now, shift the gear into Drive.”

He does so, his knuckles white with tension.

“And now, my boy, the most important part,” I say with a dramatic pause, “press the gas pedal, gently.”

The car jerks forward, wobbling like a newborn calf taking its first steps. My heart leaps into my throat, but I swallow it, putting on a brave face for Ilya’s sake.

“You’re doing great,” I encourage him, though I’m clutching the side door like a lifeline.

His eyes flicker to me and then back to the road ahead. “You’re not just saying that to make me feel better?”

“Would I lie to you?” I tease.

He smiles. It’s a simple expression, but it holds a world of meaning. A look of determination settles over him. “Okay, let’s do this.”

For the next few minutes, we drive around the empty parking lot, Ilya gradually growing more comfortable with the controls. When he makes a smooth turn, accelerating gently into it, my heart soars. That’s my boy.

“How’re you feeling? Ready to graduate from parking lots to actual roads?” I ask, glancing at him.

Ilya takes a deep breath, holding it for a moment before letting it out. “Yeah, I think so.”

We exit the parking lot, joining the flow of traffic on the street. It’s light at this hour, a small mercy. But despite the ease of the drive, I find my palms sweating. Thirteen years of being a father, and in moments like these I truly understand the gravity of it all—the weight of guiding another human being through life, of helping him become the person he’s meant to be.

We drive in silence for a bit, both lost in our thoughts until we come to a stop at a red light. I turn to look at Ilya, so grown up now but still my little boy in so many ways.

“You’re doing a great job,” I tell him sincerely. “I’m proud of you.”

His face brightens with a smile that, even after all these years, can still effortlessly light up a room. “Thanks, Papa. That means the world to me.”

The light turns green, and Ilya eases his foot onto the gas. As we move forward, so smooth and steady now, I can’t help but think about the road that lies ahead for him—for all of us. And though there will undoubtedly be bumps along the way, turns we don’t expect and stops that catch us off guard, there’s nowhere I’d rather be than right here, riding shotgun beside my son, as we navigate this journey called life.

We’re cruising along the streets now, Ilya handling the wheel with increasing confidence. It’s a perfect opportunity to talk about something that’s been on my mind, especially since he’ll soon be eighteen.

“So, Ilya,” I begin, choosing my words carefully. “Have you given any thought to what you want to do in the future? Any plans, dreams, wild ambitions?”

He hesitates, gripping the wheel a bit tighter. “To be honest, Papa, I’m not really sure. I’ve been thinking about maybe shadowing Uncle Leo in the accounting department, get a feel for the family business, you know?”

A wry smile forms on my face. “Accounting, huh? I think your uncle would love that.” Ilya is as brainy as they come. Working with Leo would be a natural fit.

His shoulders relax a bit. “Thanks, Papa, that’d be great.”

“But you seem like you’ve got something else on your mind,” I probe, noting his still-uncertain expression.

He sighs, a sound that seems to carry the weight of the world. “I guess... I guess I feel bad for not having any direction. Look at my cousins. Yevgeny is already a rising star in tech, and Anya has her own art gallery. I feel like I don’t measure up, like I should already know what I want to do with my life.”

My eyes lock onto his, earnest and full of fatherly love. “Ilya, listen to me. When I was your age, I didn’t have a damn clue what I wanted. Hell, I didn’t really get my shit together until my mid-thirties, and even then, life had a way of throwing curve balls.”

His eyes flicker with a mixture of disbelief and relief. “Really?”

“Absolutely. Look, it’s perfectly normal to not have everything figured out at seventeen. No one does, despite what it may seem like. And you don’t have to compare yourself to anyone else, even your successful cousins. Everyone has their own timeline for these things. You’ll find your path, I have no doubt about that. What’s important is that you do what feels right for you and always keep your eyes forward. You might not have the destination plotted out, but the journey—ah, the journey is where you’ll find yourself, where you’ll forge yourself into the man you’re destined to become.”

For a few moments, we drive in a comfortable silence. Ilya is mulling over what I’ve said, his brow furrowed but his eyes a bit brighter than before.

Finally, he speaks. “Thanks, Papa. It means a lot to hear you say that. It’s just... the future seems so big, so full of possibilities and pitfalls, you know?”

Ah, the double-edged sword of youth: endless possibilities and the paralyzing fear that comes with them.

“I know, son, I know. The future is a vast, unknown territory, but that’s what makes it so exciting. And if you ever feel lost, remember you’re not alone. You have a family that loves you. I’ll always be here to give you a push, or pull you back, whatever you need.”

He grins, a genuine smile that lights up his face and warms my heart. “I’ll remember that.”

We drive on, the city lights blurring past us, each lost in our thoughts but connected by a newfound bond. It’s a simple conversation, perhaps, but one that feels as significant as any I’ve had in my life. I glance at my son, this incredible young

man beside me, and I'm struck by a sense of boundless optimism, for him and for whatever the future holds. He's well-equipped for the journey ahead, armed with the lessons of the past and the boundless possibilities of what's to come.

As we pull into the driveway, the engine humming softly beneath us, I realize my role as a father is far from over, but moments like these make it all worthwhile. It's in these quiet conversations that life's greatest truths are often revealed, and I can only hope this lesson will stick with Ilya as he ventures into the great unknown.

But for now, he's still my son, still learning the ropes, still finding his way. And that's okay. After all, the road ahead is long, and we've got plenty of time.

As I walk into the house, the sight that greets me could not be more perfect. Milenoë is at the dining room table, engrossed in her homework, the soft light casting a golden glow on her features. I can't help but marvel at how much she resembles her mother—those expressive, dark eyes, that indomitable spirit.

“Studying hard, or hardly studying?” I quip as I pass her.

“Dad, that joke is older than you,” she replies, rolling her eyes in that exaggerated teenage fashion – all the same, she smiles too.

Ilya and Milenoë fall right into their habitual sibling banter, trading barbs and teasing each other about everything and nothing. I can't help but laugh, my heart swelling at the sheer, unadulterated love I feel for my family.

Making my way into the kitchen, I find the axis on which my world turns—Valentina. She's lost in concentration, expertly dicing vegetables with the same precision I've seen her apply in far more dangerous contexts. I pause for a moment, simply to appreciate her. It's been years, but somehow, she still manages to take my breath away, her beauty deepening like a fine wine maturing with time.

Moving as quietly as my size will allow, I attempt to sneak up on her. Just as I'm about to surprise her, she turns slightly.

“You know, sneaking up on an assassin is never a good idea,” she warns, a teasing lilt in her voice.

“*Former* assassin,” I correct her, closing the distance between us.

She turns fully now, looking up at me with those eyes that still have the power to make my knees weak. Our lips meet, and for a moment, the world narrows down to just this—us, the love we’ve built, and the family we’ve created.

Pulling away reluctantly, she looks at me curiously. “So, how’d it go? Did you survive teaching our son the fine art of driving?”

I chuckle, looping an arm around her waist. “Survive? Barely. But Ilya got the hang of it. He’s a natural, just needs a little more confidence behind the wheel.”

“That’s great to hear,” she says, her eyes twinkling with maternal pride.

“But that’s not all we talked about,” I continue, filling her in on our heart-to-heart. “You know, our boy’s growing up, starting to think about his place in the world.”

She nods, her expression thoughtful. “It’s a lot for a seventeen-year-old to handle, but if anyone can guide him through it, it’s you.”

“You give me too much credit,” I reply, tightening my grip around her. “We’re a team, remember? It’s your wisdom and love that make this family complete.”

She smiles, and we kiss again, sealing our unspoken vows anew. As I stand there, arm still wrapped around Valentina, I notice her expression change. Her eyes drift away for a moment, as if she’s contemplating a distant horizon only she can see.

“Is everything alright?” I ask, concerned.

She chuckles, snapping back to the present. “You always did know how to read me.”

“Comes with the territory,” I reply, my eyes searching hers. “But you seem far away. Should I be worried?”

Her smile grows broader, almost teasing. “Worried? No. But I might have a little surprise for you.”

She takes my hand and places it gently on her belly. “Two surprises, to be exact.”

It takes a moment for the weight of her words to sink in. When they do, my eyes widen, my heart soaring at the implication. Twins. Before I can ask for details, or even formulate a coherent thought, the sound of footsteps grows louder, and Ilya and Milenoë burst into the kitchen.

“Ew, Mom, Dad, get a room!” Milenoë exclaims, feigning teenage disgust as we share another kiss.

“I second that,” Ilya chimes in, though his grin betrays his true feelings.

Valentina and I exchange a knowing look above their heads, both of us amused and infinitely proud of the family we’ve built.

The kids’ playful banter continues, filling the room with youthful energy and laughter. But in that brief, quiet moment where I realized our family is growing yet again, my heart feels like it could burst from sheer joy and love. Twins. The word dances in my mind, creating a crescendo of excitement and awe.

Just when I think my life is as full as it could possibly be, fate—or love, or whatever cosmic force guides these things—proves me wrong, gifting me with more to cherish, more to protect, and more to love.

So here we are, standing in the center of our universe—our home—with the promise of new life and new joys on the horizon. I couldn’t ask for a better ending, or rather, a new beginning. The room echoes with the sound of our family, a symphony of voices, each one a note in the love song that is our life.

And as I share one more kiss with Valentina—ignoring the exaggerated groans of our children—I realize this is it: the ever-expanding, infinitely beautiful tapestry of our shared existence. I wouldn’t have it any other way.

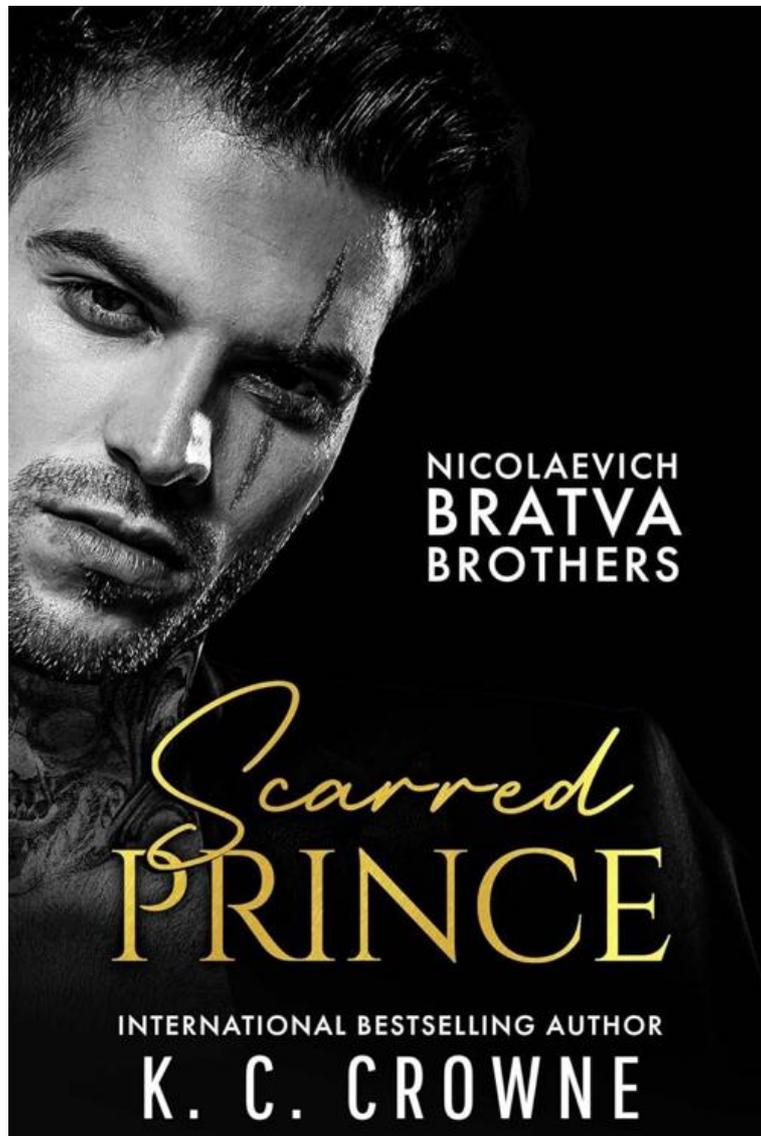
**The End**

**I hope you enjoyed Valentina and Roman's love story.  
Roman's brothers have their own steamy romances as well.**

**Check out *Andrei's story* [HERE](#).**

**Check out *Leo's story* [HERE](#).**

SCARRED PRINCE  
(PREVIEW)



**My world was rocked the night I collided with a stranger.**

**A scarred Bratva Prince.**

**He left me with a taste of submission *and his baby.***

Our saga began when he came to my rescue.

And ended in a night of passion. Thrilling and intense.

But as quickly as he appeared... he vanished.

I was certain I'd never see him again.

***Until today...***

*"I'd like you to meet our institution's most generous benefactor."*

Then a familiar Russian accent takes my breath away, *"Good evening, Nikita."*

My whole body freezes.

Apparently my dark prince comes from a powerful Bratva dynasty.

And the guy he's been wanting to put underground this whole time? ***My father.***

**Will Leo change his mind when he learns I have a secret of my own?**

*This is Leo Nicolaevich's story and a fully standalone romance. Enter the gripping realm of the Nicolaevich Bratva Brothers, where power and passion rule. In this Amazon Top 100 dark romance suspense series, four billionaire brothers dominate both their empire and the hearts of their women. The Nicolaevich and Antonov brothers share the same world.*

# CHAPTER 1

“No signal. Motherf...”

I fumble with my phone, but it’s no use.

The screen mocks me with its lack of bars.

With a huff, I shove it back into my pocket and pull my coat tighter.

My breath a vapor of fleeting warmth in the frigid air.

The whimsical joy of the first snowfall is a distant memory now; this is survival.

My car, once a trusted haven, lies defeated by the roadside, surrendering to the white wasteland that stretches between me and the Moscow city lights.

A regret claws at me, one that echoes my father’s last words sent via text – a warning or a goodbye, I wasn’t sure.

*‘Be careful. This could be the last you hear from me.’*

The Bratva is merciless, unforgiving.

His words were a riddle wrapped in a warning, a message I should’ve heeded with the gravity it deserved. But at that moment, all I could think about was the ticking clock over my father’s head. So I reached for the last remnants of my grandmother’s legacy, her cherished collection of silverware, the heirlooms she tenderly handed down. With hurried, trembling hands, I packed every gleaming piece into a duffel bag, a desperate bid to barter for time—my father’s time.

And then, cutting through the gloom, headlights – a lighthouse in the tempest.

My heart pounds a rapid rhythm of nerves and adrenaline as I brace against the unknown.

He emerges, a figure so large and imposing that even the storm seems to hold its breath.

“Quite the night for a walk,” his voice booms, a strange comfort against the howl of the wind.

A smile tugs at my lips, despite myself. “I could say the same to you.”

The blizzard calms for a heartbeat, long enough for me to glimpse the man before me. He stands there, a living contrast of danger and safety. His left eye, marred with a scar and a haze, doesn't hide the life lived or the battles fought.

There's no eye patch to cover the imperfection, just the stark truth of his existence, and somehow, that's an incredible turn on.

His black hair is a wild dance in the wind, the only thing free in the strict line of his silhouette against the sharp backlight of his vehicle.

“I figured I'd try my luck on foot,” I confess, “My car gave up on me.”

“Luck's not on our side tonight,” he warns. He gestures towards his car as the wind picks up again, an agreement from nature itself. “The storm's only getting worse.”

With each word, the cold bites deeper, the air grows thinner.

He's an enigma, yet my only chance.

“There's a cabin, just down there,” he points to an unseen path. “We can wait it out. Then, to town. Where do you need to go?”

“Abramtsevo,” I reply, wary. “But no offense, getting in a car with a stranger doesn't sound any safer than this storm.”

“What do you expect to find walking out here?” he challenges.

He’s right. Without shelter, the night could be fatal.

“I’ll drive you after the storm. Where’s your car?”

Lost in the storm, just a vague direction now. “Back there. I can’t see anything anymore.”

“I’ll handle it tomorrow,” he says. “But first, let’s get you out of the cold.”

“Look Mister, I don’t know you,” My voice barely carries over the storm’s fury.

He grins, unfazed. “You don’t seem like the type who’s easily convinced. Suit yourself, I’ll be in my car,” he says and starts back to his vehicle.

A sense of urgency takes hold, and I find myself following him. “Okay. Just please don’t be some kind of homicidal maniac.”

“I crunch numbers, not bones,” he says dryly, surprising a laugh out of me.

He nods at my duffel bag. “I’ll put that in the back for you.”

“Back seat okay?”

He raises an eyebrow, a hint of amusement dancing there.

“Trust issues?”

“Just cautious,” I retort, my cheeks warming despite the cold.

He places the duffel gently on the back seat and, once inside, the car’s heat envelopes me, seeping into my frozen bones.

Soft music from the stereo fills the space between us, and the world outside fades into a blur of white. I realize how vulnerable I’d been out there, alone.

He introduces himself as we pull away, “Leo.” “Thanks,” I reply, my voice softer than intended, as I sneak a glance his

way.

His features are clearer now, illuminated by the dash lights. The scar, the odd yet intriguing mismatch of browns in his eyes—signs of a story untold. He’s ruggedly handsome, with sharp cheekbones and a stubble that looks like it’s begging for a touch. My fingertips itch with the thought.

With a smirk, he tosses my own words back, “For all I know, you could be the danger here.”

“Touché. My name is Nikita,” I say, redirecting my gaze forward. “So, where is this place you’re taking me?”

“Just around the bend,” his voice a promise in the dim light.

And true to his word, a minute later, a hidden lane reveals itself, one I’d missed, likely blinded by the swirling snow.

Leo takes a cautious right turn, and the car starts wobbling as we go over a series of hidden potholes until we reach the cabin—a small but sturdy looking thing wedged between ancient pine trees dressed in white.

“Well, it’s a good place to bury dead bodies,” I say once I’m out of the car.

“True. But I prefer to keep a couple of vats full of acid at the back. It’s easier than digging holes in this hard ground.”

I give him a cautious look but find his smile eerily reassuring as he points to the narrow front porch of the cabin. It’s made entirely out of pine wood, with thick walls and a sloped roof, glass windows and flowerless pots hanging on both sides of the door.

“Come on, let’s go inside,” he says.

Quietly, I follow him up the steps and into the cabin.

He flicks on the lights, and I pull the door closed, sealing us away from the storm’s fury. Instantly, the hush of the cabin wraps around us, a stark contrast to the howling chaos outside. Within these walls, silence reigns, a quiet so profound it feels like the air itself is holding its breath, waiting for the fireplace to inject life into the cold room.

“Get cozy, I’ll start a fire,” he says, a casual intimacy in his tone that suggests a shared past we don’t have.

Rooted to the spot, I watch him shed his heavy coat, the movements confident and sure as he goes about sparking a fire to life. My eyes drift, taking in the room’s subtle intimacies—the mantle graced with frames that feel like memories I can almost touch, but not quite. The living space is a hug of comfort, with its plaid blankets and the creamy touch of furs draping the inviting furniture.

Beyond, the promise of further domestic secrets: a hallway leading to closed doors, probably a bedroom, a bathroom, and at the end, a kitchen that boasts of simple pleasures like an espresso machine.

The crackling fire breaks the silence, breathing a warm orange life into the room, chasing away the remnants of chill that cling to my skin. There’s a seductive kind of peace here, one that seeps into my bones, luring me deeper into the warmth of this unexpected sanctuary.

Discarding my hat, scarf, and gloves on a nearby console table, I become acutely aware of Leo’s presence. He stands by the fire, his gaze unsettlingly focused on me. The light dances across his features, revealing new angles and shadows, illuminating a raw, almost wild attractiveness that isn’t softened by the domestic surroundings. His look is a tangible thing, a slow, deliberate stroke that seems to trace the lines of my body, wrapping me in a heat that’s not entirely due to the fire.

My pulse quickens, caught in a tangle of alarm and an undeniable pull of attraction. Alone with Leo, a stranger who’s anything but ordinary, I’m lost in the complexity of my reactions—fear mingled with a desire that’s as alarming as it is compelling.

Adding another log to the fire, he disappears into the kitchen, his movements a backdrop to the companionable noise of the coffee machine. The aroma soon follows, rich and promising.

“I’ll make us coffee. Only got that to offer right now,” he calls out.

“Thanks. This isn’t a regular stop for you, then?” I ask, my voice betraying a curiosity that goes beyond casual conversation.

“Not as often as I’d like,” he replies, his voice carrying over the sound of brewing. “It’s a retreat, for when the city gets too much. It’s soul-restoring.”

I nod, understanding the need for escape.

He returns with two mugs, the steam curling up like a silent siren call. Our fingers brush—a spark, a jolt, an unexpected shiver of connection. I take a steadying breath, the coffee’s heat a welcome anchor as it slides down my throat, spreading a liquid calm.

“What brought you out in a storm like this?” he probes, his eyes still locked on mine.

“Just some family stuff,” I answer, glossing over the gritty details of debts and threats that don’t belong in this cocoon of warmth and muted tones.

He seems to read my reluctance, turning away to pull a bottle of scotch from a cabinet. “Mind if I add a bit to my coffee? It’s not like I’ll be driving anywhere anytime soon.”

“You think?” I half-joke, seeking out the window where the world has turned to a relentless swirl of white.

“In that case, I’ll join you,” I decide, accepting the inevitability of our shared confinement.

The notion of being trapped here, with him, should set me on edge. Yet, there’s a curious sense of calm that Leo brings, layered with an electric charge of anticipation that thrums at the base of my neck—a thrilling, confusing blend of safety and danger.

“You’re safe here, Nikita,” he says, his voice a deep, soothing echo that resonates with an unexpected warmth. And despite everything, I find myself wanting to believe him.

“Too late to turn back anyway, right?”

He chuckles, that sound again stirring something in me.  
“What a shame.”

“What is?”

His gaze is heavy, almost tangible, as it sweeps over me. I feel exposed, seen, and oddly, I don't mind it.

“A beautiful woman like you shouldn't be alone in a storm like this. Any boyfriend of yours should have known better,” he says.

“There's no boyfriend to speak of,” I admit, and I'm not sure why I'm admitting it, why the confession feels important.

His disbelief is almost flattering, and his intent gaze makes it hard to look away, hard to not acknowledge the electric current buzzing between us.

I want him.

It's a sudden, fierce thought.

I want to know the feel of his hair, the strength in his arms, the taste of his lips. I want...

“Leo?”

His eyebrow quirks up, a silent invitation to continue.

I lick my lips, a flutter of nerves in my stomach. “If we're going to be stuck here, maybe we could... make it memorable.”

His response is immediate, his mouth finding mine with an urgency that sets my whole body alight. The kiss is a promise, an unspoken agreement of shared desire.

Electricity pulses through me.

After a few heart pounding seconds, Leo pauses, pulling away a few inches.

A soft whine escapes me at the sudden lack of warmth.  
“Are you sure you want to do this? ”

“I'm sure,” I rasp, tugging at his belt greedily. “I'm just letting you know I don't have a lot of experience, that's all.”

“Sex with strangers?”

I roll my eyes. “Sex in general – except for...”

“I don’t want to know. Don’t worry. I’m going to show you how a real man fucks.”

I shiver, my knees practically jelly. The wet heat between my legs is starting to grow unbearable. “Then what are you waiting for?” I mutter against his mouth.

It’s all the permission he needs.

Leo takes my hand and leads me to a gorgeous bathroom, covered in marble.

He circles me in his arms and lifts me up on the countertop. I wrap my legs around his hips instinctively, clinging to him as his lips slot together with mine. His kisses are rougher, but I like it infinitely better this way.

He’s rough and demanding, proof that he wants not just my mouth, but the very air I’m trying to breathe.

It’s all-consuming and wonderfully dizzying.

Leo then carries me into the shower stall, the polished tiles cool to the touch. His big hands are surprisingly deft, peeling my clothes off piece by piece with amazing fluidity.

I don’t even have time to feel awkward about it—because on some level this should be awkward.

But Leo leaves no time for doubt.

He looks at me like he’s ready to devour, pressing hard kisses against my throat, down to my chest, squeezing my breasts while teasing my pebbling nipples with his teeth.

He sucks marks against my breasts, a hand slipping between my legs to gather up the slick heat there. A heady groan rips itself from my lungs when his fingers slide over my folds.

“Hurry up,” I rasp. “Shouldn’t you be naked by now?”

Leo rises to full height, peering down at me with a mischievous glint in his eyes. “It’s called foreplay, my kitten.”

He brushes the pad of his thumb over my sensitive clit, sending sparks flying through my body. Pleasure ebbs and flows through every fiber of my being, punctuated with his kisses and caresses.

I claw at his shirt, eager to see him naked and equally exposed.

The hard press of his cock against my thigh thrills me, hard and hot and doing its best to escape the confines of his pants.

He works me over with his fingers, teasing me until I'm on the edge of insanity, so consumed by pleasure I can't help but scream against his shoulder as I crash into my climax.

I accidentally bump the shower knob, turning on the high-pressure spray. We're drenched through in seconds, steam filling the already hot space.

"I'm sorry," I half-laugh. It's hard to feel genuinely bad now that his shirt is transparent, revealing the mosaic of dark tattoos beneath the white fabric.

Leo doesn't seem too upset. "That's fine. I'll just buy a new shirt."

He finally—finally—shrugs off his shirt while I reach between us and make quick work of his belt. Hooking my fingers over the waistband of his pants, I push down and marvel at the sheer size of him.

Good God, the man's massive. His cock springs free, hard and standing at attention. My knees give out, but he catches me and scoops me and turns me around, massaging his cock against my folds from behind.

"Take me," I almost beg him.

"What do you say?" He narrows his eyes at me, but I can see him boiling on the inside.

"Please, sir."

"Please, sir, what?"

“Please, sir, fuck me out of my mind,” I say, barely recognizing myself anymore.

He thrusts himself deep inside me with all of his might, and what follows is a storm of passion and animalistic possession.

He pounds into me, deeper and harder as I’m stretched beyond belief, as every single nerve ending in my body screams, as a second orgasm urgently works its way through me. “I’m going to make you come again,” Leo says.

He rams into me, deeper, harder, faster until it hurts so good that I rub myself most viciously, not stopping until the pressure reaches its peak, until he grabs a handful of my hair and pulls my head back, kissing me harshly as we both come undone, as I explode all over him and he explodes inside me, his cock filling me to the brim.

“You’re mine tonight, Nikita,” he whispers gruffly in my ear.

“I’m yours tonight,” I reply. We’re coming down from the heavens, now, yet I can tell from the ravenous look in his eyes that we are anything but done.

“You’re mine for as long as I want,” Leo says, his hold tightening on my jaw while I feel his cock growing again inside of me.

He cannot pull himself out. Why would he, when he’s catching fire again, and my pussy is still clenching him tightly?

“Yes, sir,” I reply, most satisfied as he releases my jaw and proceeds to massage my breasts, his hips swaying slightly.

It’s going to be a long night, a sweet and decadent night as I will submit to this man with everything I’ve got.

He’ll take me every which way, over and over, and I will welcome everything he’s got to give me, in return.

I love his fingers running through my hair.

His fingers digging into my flesh.

His possessiveness.

His dominance.

The sheer size of his cock sheated inside me, filling me, fucking my brains out until I'm no more than a glimmering puddle of afterglow.



The following morning, Leo and I are dressed and back to business as usual. Our eyes speak volumes. Our bodies long for one another. My soul aches, muted underneath the layers of winter as we head back to his car and leave the cabin behind. We barely say a word to each other as the last of the snowflakes fall over a vastness of pristine white.

Once we're off the country road, those ancient pines quietly bidding us farewell forever, I give him a long look, admiring his profile while he keeps his eyes focused ahead. I remember kissing those lips. I remember him stretching my lips and deep-throating me like a beast last night. I remember him eating me whole and devouring every inch of me until we were nothing but shadows melting on the furry carpet in front of the fireplace, naked and covered in sweat.

I will remember it all forever, I think. I certainly don't want to forget a single second of this. My flesh aches in the sweetest way.

"You'll be safe here?" Leo asks as he drops me off at the train station in Abramtsevo. He gives me his coat to wear over my jacket. "It'll keep you warm."

"I'll be okay."

"Take it, Nikita. I don't want you freezing, not even for a minute."

I can't help but smile and decide not to refuse his coat. I put it on and get out of the car. "Alright then."

"You go straight home, okay?"

“Yes, thank you,” I say, the duffel bag resting heavily on my shoulder. “Drive safe.”

It’s all I can say at this point. I’d ask him to stay, to take me to Moscow with him, but we agreed we’d be strangers again in the morning, and it’s almost time to get back to reality. I’ve got a father in need of rescuing. A prima ballerina slot to earn. A life to build. It was fun, passionate, and intense. It was incredible to let myself be possessed and controlled the way I let Leo possess and control me.

Duty calls, however. And he knows it, too.

“I’ll see you again, maybe?” Leo says, half-smiling from behind the wheel.

“Maybe,” I mumble and shut the passenger door of his car.

*Probably never again.*

By the time I get home to Moscow, it’s late in the afternoon. I scramble to get everything else of value that I can take to the pawnshop, and once I’m done, I take the duffel bag over to my father’s apartment.

It’s loaded with cash, this time, while my shoulders are loaded with tension, my mind loaded with anger and resentment. I am partially responsible, after all. He got in this sort of trouble because of me, because of my passion.

Upon reaching the front door, however, I notice something uncanny.

It’s unlocked and slightly ajar.

I go in, greeted by silence and darkness.

“Dad?” I call out and turn the hallway light on first.

I gasp at the sight of a side table that was thrown over.

A broken vase and wilted flowers resting in a puddle of water on the floor.

Papers scattered everywhere. Droplets of blood smeared across the wall.

My father’s phone tossed to the corner, the screen cracked.

Something happened here. Something awful.

## CHAPTER 2

“**B**reak his kneecaps.”

My fingers twitch as I watch my younger brothers, Samuil and Roman, grab Erik Belov by either arm to hold him still while my half-brother, Damien, approaches with a crowbar in his hands.

I don't actually *want* to break Erik's kneecaps. It's an empty threat, one meant to spur a response out of him. Besides, I don't want to get blood on the carpet. Lord knows I'd never hear the end of it from Andrei. We're in his office. I'm just borrowing it while he's away.

“P-please!” Erik stutters. “Please, don't do this! I'll have the money for you by the end of the week—I swear!”

My fingers twitch again. I'm pretty sure I'm in need of a fresh nicotine patch. I gave up smoking two months ago at my sister-in-law's insistence going cold turkey has been a giant pain in my ass. I haven't picked up a cigarette yet, but no matter what I do, I can't seem to kick the craving. My tobacco addiction seems to rear its ugly head when I'm trying to collect on long overdue debts from deadbeat scumbags.

Like right now, for instance.

“We've been more than patient, Erik,” I say slowly, my voice a low growl. “When you couldn't pay up at one of our gambling dens, my boys wanted to shoot you on site. Don't you agree that giving you the opportunity to pay us back later was more than generous?”

Erik Belov trembles. A thick layer of sweat paints his forehead with a sticky sheen, several thick beads of moisture dripping down his brow and cheeks. By my estimate, he's probably pushing sixty. His hair is thinning at the sides and bald at the top, what little he has left is a light gray. The man's complexion is blotchy—wrinkled and covered in sunspots. After I came back to Moscow following my mind-numbing snowstorm detour in Nikita's arms, I had Erik dragged out of his apartment and brought over here. He's been stewing for a few hours now, and I can tell he feels sorry for having crossed us.

But he'll find no pity from me. Anyone who dares to steal from the Bratva is a dead man walking. I gave him a second chance. It's not my fault he chose to squander it.

Erik quivers like a mouse. "I just need a little more time, One-Eye."

I cringe internally. One-Eye was a little nickname my sister-in-law, Sandra, lovingly gave me when we first met two years ago because I have, in fact, one good eye. My left was damaged in a knife fight ages ago, my vision reduced to nothing more than the slightest differentiation of shadows. It's a little on the nose, if you ask me, but the stupid nickname has stuck, and I frankly can't be bothered to try and change it.

Nikita didn't seem to care about it much. I'm still stunned by how responsive she was, by how surprised she was by her own willingness to submit. I shake the thoughts away, remembering where I am and what I'm supposed to do. *Back to the real world, One-Eye. That blizzard dream is over. She's gone.*

"Nine-hundred thousand rubles," I mutter. "Even if I gave you until the end of the week, where's a guy like you going to find that kind of money?"

"I'll think of something," Erik insists. "I'll sell everything I own, I'll borrow money from my family—I'll do *anything*. Please, I'm begging you."

I stay quiet, deliberately allowing him to stew in his own silence. I want him to understand just how serious this is.

Because when it comes to money, I'm as serious as the plague.

In an official capacity, I'm the Bratva's numbers man. The accountant. I wasn't lying to Nikita when she asked me what I did for a living. There she goes again, crossing my mind. Every ruble, every kopeck... It all has to be accounted for. Business expenses, monthly profits, redistribution and laundering back into the system. That's my specialty. My bread and butter. Numbers are neat and logical. I find great joy in obsessing over every penny. An organization of our size is only as good as their bookkeeper otherwise everything falls apart at the seams.

I'm more than aware there's no glory in keeping diligent financial records. People think being a criminal is all about violence and firepower. Flashy cars, jewels, and women. Wannabe gangsters are only after the fortune, the parties, the lifestyle. But the truth of the matter is, you can't just take what you want and expect to get away with it.

To us, this is a business. A legacy that will hopefully last for generations to come. What differentiates my brothers and me from the run-of-the-mill street-dealing hustler is that we're *smart*. We cover our tracks. The police can't bring you in for a crime they can't trace back to you. *Follow the money*, as the old adage goes, but if I've done everything correctly—the cops will chase themselves in circles until the end of time.

I exhale heavily, giving Erik a cold glare down the length of my nose. Nine-hundred thousand rubles is peanuts to the Bratva—we make that amount in a day—but I can't very well let him off the hook. There's a lesson to be taught here. Erik has the misfortune of being made into an example. If word gets out that the Antonov-Nicolaevich Bratva is willing to forgive being stolen from if you piss your pants hard enough, it'll do irreparable damage to our reputation.

“Friday,” I state firmly. “By seven pm. If I don't have that money in front of me...” I trail off, seeing no point in finishing my sentence. My threat feels much heavier now that it lingers in the air, unfinished.

“R-right,” he stammers. “Of course. Thank you. Thank you so much.”

I wave a hand dismissively, signaling to my brothers to take him away. Damien throws a black cloth bag over Erik’s head, and Samuil throws him over his shoulder to carry him out.

Nothing bad is going to happen to the man. This is all for the sake of appearances and keeping our current location a secret. Nobody needs to know the Bratva works out of the Nicolaevich Brothers Taxi Company depot. We’re just going to toss him into the back of one of our vehicles, drive around the block a couple of times so Erik’s all turned around, and then we’ll send him on his merry way until Friday.

“Well, *One-Eye*,” Roman says with a cheeky grin. “What are we going to do when the poor fucker can’t pay up? Do we drive him out to a nice lake somewhere and have him look at the ducks?”

“He’ll pay.”

“You sound so sure.”

“One way or another, we’re going to get that money back. Either in cash, or we’ll find a way to make him work for it.”

Roman puts his hands up in mock surrender. “If you say so.”

“Why are you still standing there? Don’t you have work to do?”

“Are you so eager to get rid of me, brother?” Roman clicks his tongue, a sudden realization twinkling behind that smug face of his. “Oh, I know. You’re still trying to hunt down our skimmer?”

I grit my teeth, swallowing my annoyance. My fingers twitch again, eager for a cigarette to hold. I settle for a nearby pen.

For the past three months, I’ve noticed an anomaly when tabulating the books. It started small at first, a couple of rubles here and there. I chalked it up to minor miscalculations

somewhere in our lieutenants' reports. Nothing overly concerning, though it did warrant a long, boring speech about due diligence. Things were perfectly fine after that.

Until two weeks ago—around the middle of November—when I found a series of miscalculations yet again. This time, hundreds of thousands of rubles missing. To say I'm irritated about not realizing sooner is an understatement. Nothing is supposed to get past me, especially something as egregious as this. Someone within our ranks has been helping themselves to my family's money, all while under my nose.

Whoever they are, they're clever enough to only take small amounts at one time, and always infrequently. There's no pattern to it, no way to predict when it will happen again. And since most of our illicit operation is cash-based and filtered through our taxi company, it's damn near impossible to track. Now I have the wonderful task of picking through every single one of our businesses to find out where our skimmer has been lifting funds from.

At the rate things are going, it looks like they're saving up for one hell of a Christmas celebration. They could buy themselves a brand-new luxury BMW with how much they've managed to steal from us. I guess it's true what they say: there's no honor amongst thieves.

It's a fucking insult is what it is. I refuse to let them get away with it any longer.

"I'm dealing with it," I grumble. "Now, get out so I can concentrate."

"I think we should tell Andrei."

Slowly, I rise from my chair and shake my head. "He doesn't need to know yet."

"But—"

"Andrei and Sandra are enjoying some well-deserved time away with their kids. This happened on my watch, so I'll be the one to deal with it. He does too much for us and asks for little in return. I see no sense in bothering him with something this trivial."

Roman smiles, cocky as ever. “Calm down, Mister Bleeding Heart. I just wanted to know if we should keep him in the loop, that’s all.”

“I have everything under control.”

“You do?” When I glare at him, Roman throws his head back and laughs. “I mean, you do!”

“Nice save,” I mutter.

“Oh, don’t be such a grump. Christmas is around the corner. Don’t want to end up on Santa’s naughty list, do you?”

“Has anyone ever told you how annoying you get around the holidays?”

“I’m annoying all the time,” my brother shoots back with a wink.

“That’s not something to be proud of.”

“It’s part of my charm.”

“Nothing about you is charming.”

“Tell that to the three pretty ladies I’m taking out to dinner tonight.” I’m not sure what my face does, but I’m sure it accurately reflects my disgust because Roman then says, “I know, right? They’re into sharing or whatever. I bet you’re jealous.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and sigh. “I’m not jealous. I’m just worried about my man whore of a brother catching an STD.”

“Aww, you *do* care!”

“Get out before I shoot you between the eyes.”

Roman chuckles. “I’m going, I’m going. You need to learn to relax, Leo. How about I set you up with one of my dates tonight?”

“Fuck off.”

He shrugs as he starts toward the exit. “Suit yourself. I’ll leave you here to count your coins, Ebenezer.”

“Knock it off with that shit.”

Roman laughs his way out the door. Truth be told, I'm still reeling from Nikita's sweet, wet warmth. Her moans of pleasure and submission still echo in the back of my brain. I went up to that cabin to clear my mind and figure out a way to catch the skimmer. I certainly didn't expect to find a hot damsel stranded on the side of the road, a damsel whose body sang whenever I touched her. I'll stick to counting my coins, thank you, and wondering if our paths will ever cross again.



I stay at the taxi depot until the night shift manager, Arman, clocks in. We hired him many years ago, when our taxi company was still learning to walk and our ventures into the criminal underworld were nothing more than an idea. He's not much of a talker, but I think that's one of the things I like most about him. When Arman comes to work, I never have to worry about wasting my breath with pointless small talk.

He's a diligent man. Always shows up on time, never complains about the late nights or long hours. And what's more, he never sticks his nose where it doesn't belong. Arman doesn't ask questions about my brothers' oddly timed comings and goings, nor does he seem particularly interested in finding out. All in all—the perfect employee.

The rest of the night shift shows up not long after. I know each and every one of them by name. There's Vlad whose breath reeks of garlic and onions, but he's never without a smile. Georgi, a kid mid-way through college who works here part-time to earn a little extra on the side. And then there's Kostya. He's the shiftiest son of a bitch I've ever laid my good eye on, but he puts in the hours and never so much as grumbles.

They're a good group, good enough to manage the taxi company while my brothers and I get some well-deserved rest. There have admittedly been a couple of times when I questioned if one of the skimmers could be amongst their ranks, but none of them know about my family's involvement with the Bratva. My brothers and I have been careful to draw

the line between our two worlds, cautious not to involve those who have no business knowing. Besides, I doubt any of them have the balls to steal from the likes of me. They're working men, not crooks.

“One of our drivers called out sick,” I inform Arman as I pull on my black winter overcoat. “And six of our cars were pulled in for maintenance, so you're working with a smaller fleet tonight. The cold snap this morning shocked the engines.”

Arman nods. “Thanks for letting me know, boss.”

“Call me if anything unexpected crops up.”

“Will do.”

And that's that. Nice and painless.

I leave through the back doors of the depot and head to my car. It's nothing special, just the latest model of the Lada Granta in a sleek jet black. As joint heads of the Bratva with his wife, Andrei doesn't particularly approve of us being flashy. Frankly, I agree with him. Showboating is the fastest way to draw the wrong kind of attention. My younger brothers

understand this to varying degrees—Roman being the worst of the bunch with his weakness for parties and arm candy.

The drive home takes less than twenty minutes, most of the day's traffic thinned out into the wee hours of the evening. A thin layer of snow has started to build up on the pavement, a light flurry sweeping over Moscow. Many businesses have taken to putting up colorful twinkling lights ahead of the busy holiday season, little bulbs winking brighter than the stars above.

I'm only a few blocks away from my apartment complex when I spot something up ahead. A familiar face. Erik Belov, standing on the edge of the pavement, looking small and meek under his grey overcoat, his hair still a mess from the earlier feather ruffling in Andrei's office. He's waiting for someone. A yellow taxi pulls over across the street and honks twice. One of the backseat passenger windows slides down, and a

woman's hand waves at Erik. I notice the look of surprise on his face, recognizing her. Suddenly, he is illuminated with relief.

I slow down to let him cross, holding back a smile as I wonder if he can even see me at this point. He glances my way and to the right, then bolts straight for the taxi, scuttling across the street like a scared little lemming.

Shaking my head slowly, I drive right by. It's none of my concern. He's free of me until Friday at seven p.m. There's nothing I want more than to go home, kick up my feet, and help myself to a finger of premium vodka until I catch a glimpse of the passenger —merely a fleeting moment that rattles me to the core.

A young woman. Blonde hair pulled up into a messy bun, her locks so light and soft the strands almost look silver.

I've seen her before. I must've. But I'm farther up the road now, and there's enough traffic flowing both ways that I can't turn the car around to have a better look without catching some cop's eye. It's a double continuous line here, and I've already spotted the traffic police stationed on the right side just ahead. These boys need to get their quota of fines on a daily basis, and I have no intention of giving them any more money than what they're skimming off the rest of these fools.

Nikita. She reminded me of Nikita. It couldn't be her though. She lives up north. I left her behind days ago. Damn, she really left a mark on me since I keep seeing her face everywhere I look.

It's best if we never see each other again.

## CHAPTER 3

I hope I get to see him again.

Even after the horrendous days that I've had, desperately trying to find my father after I found his apartment door open and his place trashed, I can't stop thinking about Leo, about his brooding presence, the darkness in his expression, the invisible, crushing weight he seemed to carry on his wide shoulders. Everything about him was so *serious*—from his dark black hair, sharp nose, strong jaw and his scarred eye.

Most people might be afraid of a man like Leo. In fact, a sane person probably would have declined his offer of help out of a need for self-preservation. Something in his stance radiated power and danger, but I wasn't afraid. The feeling in my gut told me Leo only wanted to help. He wasn't going to hurt me. And he didn't. Instead, he claimed me for hours on end, consuming me until there was nothing left of me, yet I had plenty more to give him. I still get wet just remembering that night and the first few hours of that following morning. His coat is all I have to remember him by, tucked away in my dresser. More than once, I took it out to smell it, to try to remind myself of our night together.

If Mother ever found out, though, she'd scold me for being so naive. Foolish. But I try not to judge a book by its cover. I'd rather assume the best and be proven wrong, than assume the worst and be proven right.

Leo proved himself to be a knight in shining armor—his rough edges, general gloominess, and stark manner of speaking aside. And I got my father back in one messy piece

in the end, though not without me giving him a piece of my mind. I wonder what Mother would say if she found out about Dad's latest blunder. She'd tear him a new one, for sure. All's well that ends well, right? No harm, no foul? I'm sure I can find a few more expressions to hastily describe this past week while I pretend that everything is okay, even when I know it's anything but. My father is in deep trouble, and I'm about to pay the price in order to keep him alive. He may have a complicated relationship with my mother, but I cannot imagine a world without them in it.

“Nikita!” Inessa snaps from the front of the practice room. “Focus! Turn your feet out more. Why are your movements so sloppy this morning?”

I grip the barre tight, forcing a sharp breath in through the nose to help kick start my concentration. I'm horrified to discover that I'm horrendously off-beat, the jovial piano tune and the rest of the ballet company carrying on without me. Instead of racing to catch up, I simply pause, take a deep breath, and then rejoin them with the next warm-up sequence. I'm thankfully back on track, but Inessa's face is still pinched and sour.

*There's just no pleasing Mother.*

We go through our usual routine. Next comes the guided stretches, then center work, reverence, and then pointe work. By the time we're through, I'm dripping with sweat and red in the face—but I'm having the time of my life. There's nothing more gratifying than the warm hum of my muscles and the light, satisfying burn in my lungs after a morning spent on the tips of my toes.

“Your fouettés are so beautiful,” Kseniya says to me after class is done. She's a fellow soloist with gorgeous brunette locks and sparkling green eyes. She's a few years younger than myself—only nineteen—but there are whispers going around that she's likely going to be made a principal dancer after the new year.

I bite down the ugly green feeling of jealousy that rises inside me, forcing the thought away. Kseniya is a wonderful

dancer. I try to tell myself I should be happy for her success, that she deserves it. Being happy for others costs nothing, after all. It's just...

It's just that I turned twenty-four the past March and haven't been making any progress. There's nothing more terrifying than the thought of my career at the Bolshoi stagnating. Most ballerinas retire between thirty to forty years of age, which means I'm quickly running out of time. I thought I'd be further along by now. Not to sound boastful, but my skills as a dancer are top tier. I'm good at what I do.

But maybe I'm not good *enough*.

All my classmates at the Vaganova Academy of Russian Ballet have already made their soloist debuts. *Giselle*, *Swan Lake*, *Don Quixote*... What I wouldn't give to earn one of my dream roles, to feel the heat of the spotlight on my skin and listen to the thunderous applause of a captivated crowd. It's a terrible feeling—being left behind.

It stings twice as much this year because we're putting on a performance of *The Nutcracker* in December and the role I wanted—the Sugar Plum Fairy—went to Vanya, the Bolshoi's star soloist. I was relegated to nothing more than her understudy. In all honesty, the announcement didn't come as a surprise, but that didn't mean I wasn't disappointed. I've wanted to be the Sugar Plum Fairy since I was old enough to stand on pointe. I even auditioned for it this year, too. Needless to say, my ego's been crushed into a fine powder.

"Do you want to grab lunch with me today?" Kseniya asks with a sweet smile. "That cute café around the block has the best fruit parfaits."

I reflect her smile. Kseniya is probably one of my closest friends at the company, which is saying something considering we rarely hang out outside of the studio. We eat, breathe, *live* ballet and that usually means very little energy for much else. Which is why my brief trip up to Loza was such an effort, to begin with. Had Leo not found me that night, I don't know if I would've made it back in time for rehearsals. I don't even know if I would've made it safely back home at all.

Professional ballerinas like us—we're obsessive. Dedicated to the craft, the process, the performance. Well-rounded individuals we most certainly are not—and we wouldn't have it any other way.

“Actually,” I reply after a moment of mulling things over, “a fruit parfait sounds really nice. Let me just grab some water and—”

“You're not going anywhere, Nikita.”

My head snaps up. Approaching quickly and gaining speed is none other than my mother. Inessa and I don't really look alike. I got my blonde hair and blue eyes from Dad. The only thing I inherited from Mother was our shared love of ballet. Back in the day, Inessa was a star. Her face and name were known throughout Russia. The younger dancers in the company talk about her like she's a legend—she *is* a legend—with reverence and awe when she enters the room. Her technique, perfect. Her artistry, unparalleled. Her instruction, invaluable.

I, of course, know the truth.

Inessa Belova is nothing but a tyrant in a sleek bun and wooly leg warmers, chasing after her glory days through her daughter. On some base level, I think everybody knows it. I hear their whispers in the changing rooms, the gossip surrounding me at every turn.

*Poor Nikita got yelled at again.*

*She's just not as good as Inessa once was.*

*I can't imagine that kind of pressure.*

*She didn't get a promotion. Again.*

“Vanya's going to be here any moment,” Mother says. “You need to be here taking notes as her understudy.”

I want to protest but think better of it. We're doing the Grigorovich variation, which is as classic as it gets. I've memorized every single move synchronized with every note of the music at this point. Asking me to stay behind would be redundant since I won't actually get the chance

Someone screams. It's a cry of a woman, the sound so chilling it causes the hairs on my arms to stand on end. Panic sweeps through the entire room, whispers and concerned glances passing between the dancers.

"What's going on?" Inessa snaps, rushing toward the door.

I hurry after her, my heart racing in my throat. My hand flies to my mouth, horrified at what I see. Vanya, dressed and prepped for rehearsal, sits on the floor, reaching down to hold her foot. Her face is twisted in agony, tears streaming down her eyes, her mascara a running river of black. When I look down at her shoes, I realize something is terribly wrong.

Her pointe shoes are bloody.

"S-someone put pins inside!" she wails. "Oh my God, who would do this?"

I want to vomit, a wave of disbelief and terror shredding through me. This is too cruel, too vicious. I don't understand who among us would be depraved enough to hurt Vanya—or any fellow dancer, for that matter—in such an awful, potentially career-ending way.

"Someone call the doctor!" I shout, rushing to her side. "Quickly!"

Vanya clutches my hand, trembling hard as she sobs. "It hurts!"

"We need to get her shoes off," I tell my mother.

The damage to Vanya's feet doesn't look too bad, but with our first show only a couple weeks away, there's no way she'll be able to recover in time. This whole thing is incredibly disturbing. No way this was an accident. It was sabotage.

Inessa glares at me. "What are you still doing here? Get back inside and get ready."

I furrow my brows. "What?"

"I'll make sure the doctor takes a look at her. *You* need to start practicing for opening night."

The weight of Inessa's words doesn't truly hit me until I've made my way back into the practice room, dazed and numb. This isn't right. This isn't what I wanted. It's a huge honor to be able to play such an important role in the upcoming ballet, but did I truly earn it?

I stare at my reflection in the floor-to-ceiling mirrors, studying my form. There's no time to waste. I have a lot to prove and everything to lose. Now isn't the time to let my inner doubts win. It's time to introduce this understudy to the limelight.



By the time I get home, I'm bone-tired and ready for bed. I can still hear Inessa's shrill voice shouting corrections at me.

*Point your feet.*

*Why aren't you smiling?*

*Don't flap your arms like that, have a little grace!*

All things considered, I thought I managed rather well. Not that my mother had anything encouraging to say.

"Has there been any news about Vanya?" I ask her as we approach our apartment door. We used to live here with Dad until Mother sent him away on account of his gambling issues. She didn't care that he did it for us, for me—in particular. The shame he brought upon us was too much to bear, so he's been living away for a few months now.

Normally, he'd be home from the dealership by now. He works Mondays to Fridays selling cars, though he's always had dreams of becoming a writer—something he's only ever confided in me and not my mother.

"Nothing yet," Inessa grumbles. "But we'll get to the bottom of this one way or another."

"I think I'll buy her some flowers."

"You're probably the last person she wants to see right now."

I frown as Mother jams the keys into the lock. “What do you mean?”

“Really think about it, Nikita. Use that brain of yours. If your understudy got to take over weeks before your performance after a blatant sabotage attempt, would you want to see her?”

My mouth drops open. “You can’t possibly think I had anything to do with this. I could never—”

“I know,” Mother interrupts. She roughly smooths her hand over my hair—the closest thing to affection she can muster. “You’re too sweet to do such a terrible thing. Just be careful, that’s all.”

“It’s just so strange. Vanya doesn’t have any enemies. Everybody adores her.”

Inessa shrugs. “Don’t be foolish. We *all* have enemies. It’s just a matter of knowing where to look. Rest assured, the administration is looking into this. They’re taking it very seriously.”

When we step into the apartment, the lights are off. Unusual, until I remember who’s not around anymore. Dad would normally be on the couch watching TV by now or flitting around the kitchen to help with dinner. I’ve had plans for a while now to move into my own place, but rent isn’t cheap on a ballerina’s salary, and more often than not, Inessa and I carpool to and from work together so it just makes sense to continue to live with my parents.

I hear a strange shuffling sound coming from my room. Something—*someone*—is rummaging through my stuff. Curious and a bit alarmed, I tiptoe down the hall cautiously, reaching around the edge of my door frame to flick on the light.

“Dad?” I call out.

He whips around, shoving his hands into his pants pockets. He smiles sheepishly, but it doesn’t reach his eyes. He’s sweaty for some reason, his cheeks flushed and his eyes

watery. “Nikita!” he exclaims with an uneasy chuckle. “Welcome home. How was everything today?”

I stare at him, trying to pick through my questions. Where do I even begin? I want to tell him I’m going to be a soloist. I want to tell him about the pins in Vanya’s shoes. I want to ask him what the hell he’s doing rummaging through my things, but I can’t find the words to form proper sentences.

“Dad, what are you doing here?”

He glances over my shoulder with an anxious swallow. “Is your mother here?”

“In the kitchen. Dad, you’re not supposed to be here. I thought Mother took your key away.”

“I always keep spares,” he shoots back with a dry smirk.

“What are you doing here?” I ask again, my voice lower this time. The last thing I want is Mother overhearing us, especially after I had to hail a cab and pick my own father off the side of the road after he called me. I was still looking for him at the time, nearing the edge of madness and about to file a police report. He thinks I’m not aware of his troubles, but I know. I’ve been pawning stuff just to get money together to save his ass.

He gets up close, shifty and breathless. “I’m sorry, Nikita,” he says, barely a whisper. “I’d, uh... I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell your mother.”

Concern lances through me. “You’re really starting to freak me out. What’s going on?”

He rubs the back of his neck. “I... forgot to pay a bill. The rent.”

My face falls. “Oh, that’s okay. It happens—” Of course, I’m faking it. He wouldn’t tell me what happened when I picked him up in the cab. The man’s ego is too big, too fragile, and I still don’t know how to handle him, sometimes. I keep telling him to get his head screwed back on so he and Mother can make peace, so he can move back here, but I feel as though I’ve been screaming at the walls lately.

“Things at the dealership... I wasn’t able to make very much in commission this month, so I’m a bit behind. ”

It’s not exactly a lie. What he’s earning from the dealership isn’t enough to cover his Bratva debt. I keep looking over my shoulder, my ears twitching as I listen to Mother’s activities in the kitchen. She can’t find him here, like this. Inessa is just as strict at home as she is at the ballet. My whole life has been spent walking on eggshells, afraid to be on the tail end of her disapproval. She’s not *all* bad—but she’s definitely more prickly than soft.

“How much money do you need?” I ask gently, without a hint of judgment. “I have money saved, you know that. I can just lend it to you and—”

“No, no,” he says hurriedly. “That money is for your future.”

“But Dad—”

“I’ll figure something out.” The way he forces his smile even wider makes my heart twist. Maybe I should just confront him and tell him I know everything. I hate seeing the two of us lie to each other like this.

“Can’t we just talk to the landlord? I’m sure he’d be willing to work things out with us. We’ve always been good tenants.”

Dad nods, casting his gaze to the floor. “You’re right. You’re absolutely right. I’m sorry I got so flustered. I should go.”

“Don’t let her see or hear you,” I tell him.

He nods once and shuffles off. I don’t hear the front door as he leaves the apartment, which means Inessa didn’t hear it, either. Good. I inspect the wooden clothing drawer which is stuffed full of athletic wear—shirts, sweaters, tights, an endless supply of leg warmers. At first glance, I find nothing amiss. I don’t know what he was looking for, but I don’t think he found it. Hell, I don’t know what’s going through his head these days or why he does certain things anymore. He is desperate. And whether he likes it or not, I am going to help

him. The sooner he's safe and back with us, the better. I remember overhearing Mother when they were arguing, when she flat out told him she knew he was indebted to the Bratva on account of his gambling. I haven't been able to look at him the same since, but he is still my father, and I still owe much of who I am today to this man.

“Nikita!” Inessa snaps from down the hall. “Come eat and then go to bed! We have an early morning tomorrow.”

I take a deep breath and try to collect my thoughts. This has been a whirlwind of a day. I sincerely hope I'm not swept off my feet.



*END OF PREVIEW*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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