



 *Arrogant*

MISTAKE

VLASOV BRATVA BOOK TWO

NICOLE FOX

ARROGANT MISTAKE

VLASOV BRATVA

BOOK 2

NICOLE FOX

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ARROGANT MISTAKE

VLASOV BRATVA BOOK 2

Running from my wedding was a mistake.
But only because I should've *kept* running.
If I'd just kept running right past Daniil Vlasov, none of this
would've happened.
My daughter wouldn't be missing.
My heart wouldn't be broken.
My life wouldn't be in shambles.
Some loves burn so hot they hurt.
Daniil says we're going to make it through this fire...
But I've already messed up so many times.
Will trusting him be the last mistake I ever make?

***Arrogant Mistake is Book 2 of the Vlasov Bratva duet. The
story begins in Book 1, Arrogant Monster.***

DANIIL

Mistakes were made, son. Mostly by you.

My father's words are still ringing in my ear as I drop my phone back into my pocket. My pulse is pounding violently in my temples.

The thing is, he's not wrong. I've fucked up again and again lately. I got too close, then too careless. I got too cocky.

And in the end, it's not me who pays the ultimate price.

It's the little girl who deserves so much better.

"Daniil?"

Kinsley's eyes are trained on me, half-desperate and half-accusatory. I know I need to comfort her, but right now, I have too much rage rolling through me to consider that Kinsley is as terrified as I am. I'm aware of that, of course—I'm aware of everything, painfully aware of it, so aware that every nerve ending in my body feels like it's on fire—but it just registers as a distant fact. Unemotional. Objective.

"I will handle this," I tell her in a cold voice. Then I brush past her.

I head back into the gymnasium, back to the throng of teachers. The principal is pale-faced and frantically tapping at his phone with shaking hands.

"Who are you calling?" I ask.

He looks up at me, horrified. "The police, of course! A young woman has been kidnapped. We—"

I reach out, pluck the phone from his hand, and tuck it into his shirt pocket. “No need,” I say. “We found her. She’s in the parking lot, waiting for us by my car.”

“She is?”

I nod. “She just needed some space. We’re taking her home now.”

“Oh. Well. Alright then.” The principal looks past me at Kinsley. “Ms. Whitlow, are you alright?”

“I...”

Her voice falters as she looks toward me. That same mix of emotions is there in her eyes: desperation, fear, anger. The precipice she’s teetering on is obvious: fight me or trust me?

She’s spent ten years doing the former.

Tonight, she chooses the latter.

“Yes, of course,” she forces out. “I’m just worried about Isla. We should get her home.”

“Of course,” the principal says. “Will you let me know how she is tomorrow?”

Kinsley nods. Then we make our way to the parking lot. Her body is tense the entire time, and fear ripples across the air between us.

My scent still lingers on her skin. I can smell the tang of disinfectant from the lab tables, and beneath it, the sweat of terror.

We get all the way into the parking lot before she turns to me, pulling me to a stop. “Isla isn’t waiting for us by the car, is she?”

“No,” I say quietly. “She’s not.”

Kinsley winces. “Then why the hell did you do that? We should have let Principal Bridges call the cops!”

“Get in the car, Kinsley.”

“No!” she bites out, her eyes burning furiously. The green in her irises is brighter than I’ve ever seen it. “Why should I go

anywhere with you?”

“Because I’m the only one who can get Isla back.”

“Which means you know where she is. You know who took her.” She sucks in her breath. She wasn’t stupid enough to expect a denial, but maybe she’s desperate enough to have hoped for one. “The man you just called...”

“Is the one who took her, yes.”

“Oh God,” Kinsley gasps, her breathing growing more and more erratic. “Oh God.”

We don’t have time for her panic, though. Gregor could be doing anything. God knows he isn’t sitting on his ass waiting for my response. He’s scheming. He’s manipulating. It’s what he does best.

And I don’t intend to give him that much of a head start.

I start striding towards the car. Kinsley is forced to follow behind me. She gets inside after me, her eyes glazed over with shock and disbelief.

“If you know who took her, why can’t we just give his name and information to the cops?”

“No. This is how things are done in my world.”

“Well, it’s not how things are done in mine.” Then she proceeds to pull out her phone and dial in 911. I grab her phone before she can press **CALL** and slip it into my pocket.

She lunges at me, but it’s useless to fight and she knows it. She screams in frustration and starts bashing her fists against me. My arm, my chest, my leg. Whatever she can find, whatever she can reach, just to inflict some pain on someone else because she has far too much of it to keep it all bottled up inside.

“Kinsley,” I say quietly, “stop.”

A wail escapes her, but she doesn’t stop hitting me. Not until I grab both her hands and force her to be still. She stares at me with tears running down her cheeks.

This is the closest she's looked to that lost, naïve young woman I'd pulled out of the river ten years ago. I still remember those exact tear tracks. As I watch, another teardrop rolls down her cheek.

"You promised me you'd protect us," she rasps, her voice broken. "Promised you'd protect *her*."

"I know."

"Is your pride more important than our daughter's safety?" She wriggles angrily in my grasp. "Huh? Is it?"

"Nothing is more important than our daughter's safety."

"Oh yeah?" she scoffs incredulously. "Why the hell would I believe that? You just lied to everyone in there!"

"Some lies are necessary."

"Bullshit. Bullshit. What a bunch of fucking bullshit!"

She buries her face in her hands and screams in wordless frustration. I turn on the engine and reverse my convertible out of the school's parking lot. She screams as we round the corner, as we accelerate, as the night wind whips around the contours of the car like it's screaming right along with her.

Only when there's no breath in her lungs does she let herself fall silent.

"She'll be back tonight," I tell Kinsley in a solemn voice once she's quieted. "Before the sun comes up, she'll be back home with you."

"I don't believe a damn word you say anymore," she croaks in a shattered voice that does something strange and powerful to the knot in my gut.

"Believe this: he won't hurt her."

She laughs mirthlessly. "How could you possibly know that?"

"Because the man wants an audience with me. He wants me back under his thumb, and he's using Isla as bait."

"She's nine," Kinsley mumbles. "She's not supposed to be bait. No grown man should look at her and think of her as

bait.”

“*Sladkaya*—”

“Don’t!” she screams. “Don’t you *dare* call me that. I can’t believe I ever let you into our lives, into Isla’s life. This was all a huge mistake.”

“You’re letting your emotions get the better of you,” I reply.

“Of course I am! Why the hell aren’t you letting your emotions get the better of you?” she demands. “At least then I would know you cared.”

“Would you rather me pull over and cry?” I say. “Would that make you feel better, to see me all torn up? Because I can do that if you prefer. I’ll be a useless puddle of tears. Or would you rather I do something about it?”

Kinsley just shakes her head. “Stop the car.”

“I’m driving a hundred and forty. I’m not stopping anything.”

“Stop the damn car!”

Before I can act, she lunges forward and grabs the steering wheel. My hand tightens to keep us from fishtailing, but she succeeds in forcing us off the road. For one wild moment, I wonder if our momentum will tip us over, but the vehicle rights itself just in time.

The gravel and patchy grass screeches underfoot as we come to a whistling stop. I turn to her furiously, but all the fight has already gone out of her. That act of defiance was the last bit she had. Now, she’s slumped limply in her seat, arms to her sides, breathing so heavily that she looks like she’s in danger of combusting.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” I bellow.

“I was thinking I need to get the hell away from you.” She grabs at the handle of her door, but it won’t release. “How do you open this damn thing?”

“You don’t. We’re in the middle of a deserted road, and you have no idea where you’re going.”

“I’ll figure it out! I know his name. Gregor Semenov. That’s a start.”

I’m surprised she’s remembered, but that does give me a moment of pause. If she goes to the wrong places or the wrong people and starts shouting out that name, it’ll make things so much easier for the bastard. He’ll smell her fear from a mile away.

But I don’t let on that I’m concerned. “Sure. That’s his name. But do you think you can do a quick search and his number and address will just pop up? Do you think you can just download directions to his front door?”

“I’m not a fool, Daniil.”

“No? Well, you do an awfully good impression of one.”

Her eyes narrow into furious slits. “You’re such an asshole. Open the damn doors!”

“You’re in no condition to go traipsing across an abandoned stretch of road back to your house. Request denied.”

“I’m not going back home. I’m going to one of the gangster bars downtown and I’m going to ask for Gregor Semenov.”

I raise my eyebrows.

“Yeah,” she says with a self-satisfied nod. “Like I said, I’m no fool. I know there are clubs that cater to an exclusive clientele. A very specific clientele. All I have to do is—”

“Keep your mouth shut,” I interrupt furiously. “That’s what you have to do.”

Frustrated by the locked handle, she starts hammering at the door of the car. When that obviously doesn’t help anything, her gaze turns to the screen on the dashboard. She jams down the roof rollback button. I just sigh and let her do it. As soon as there’s enough of a sliver overhead, she crawls out and vaults over onto the hood of the car.

“Fucking hell,” I growl, getting out of the car and slamming the door hard behind me.

Her heels slow her progress, but they don't dim her fire. She's marching down the road on wobbly giraffe legs, head held high.

"You're going the wrong way," I call up to her.

She twists around and marches back towards me, then passes by without so much as a sideways glance. I turn and follow along.

"That's the wrong way, too. It's a long walk to wherever you want to go, *sladkaya*."

"I'll call a damn Uber."

"How? I've got your phone."

That gets her attention. She stops walking and whirls around once more. "Give it back then."

"Do you think that's likely?" I sigh again. "This tantrum isn't going to get you anywhere, Kinsley."

"Tantrum?" she spits in disbelief. "This is not a 'tantrum,' Daniil. This is extreme and total horror. You asked me to trust you and I did. Look what it cost me."

"I will get her back."

"You shouldn't have to get her back in the first place!" she cries out.

"I made a mistake," I admit, even though the words taste like rat poison on my lips. "I should have—"

"What you should have done was stay away from both of us," she cuts in. "Now, my daughter is trapped with a fucking murderer!"

I step up to her, towering tall and incandescent with a dozen emotions at once. "All this is doing is wasting precious minutes," I seethe right in her face. "I don't have time for it. *She* doesn't have time for it. I can get Isla back, but I need to be somewhere else to make that happen. Not standing here in the middle of the road, arguing with you."

That seems to get through to her. She blinks slowly, breathes heavily.

“You want this delayed any more than it already is? No? I didn’t think so. Get in the damn car, Kinsley. Let me do the right thing. For once in my fucking life, let me do the right thing.”

She’s silent. Her eyes bore into mine.

Then, at last, she slumps. The rigidity goes out of her spine and she looks like she could fall to pieces here and now.

I keep my hand on her arm and twist her around towards the convertible. She comes so easily that it’s almost worrying.

I don’t bother pulling the soft top up again. We tear through the streets, wind hitting our faces at a hundred miles per hour. Kinsley is as silent as the night, lost in thought and probably a few vengeful fantasies at my expense.

I can’t say I blame her. I haven’t handled the situation properly. *Mistakes*, Gregor laughed. He was right. So many fucking mistakes.

We pull up to a stop out front of Kinsley’s house. I take her phone out of my breast pocket and hand it back to her. “Don’t call the cops. This will be a lot easier if they’re not involved.”

She hesitates, then nods. “You’ll bring her back?”

“I swear to you I will.”

A heartbroken laugh tumbles from her lips. “Forgive me if I don’t take your promises seriously anymore.”

She gets out of the car, but instead of storming away like I expect her to, she pauses and turns to me. “I’ll give you three hours,” she says. “If you’re not back with my daughter by then, I will call the cops. That’s a promise you can count on.”

Then she turns on her heel and storms towards the house.

KINSLEY

“Em... Emma.”

“What’s wrong?” she gasps, jumping into crisis mode as soon as she hears my blubbery voice on the phone.

“I’m sorry, I... I... I know it’s l-late...”

“Are you at home?”

“Y... yes.”

“Sit tight and don’t move a muscle. I’ll be there in ten.”

She hangs up before I can protest. I try to call back, but she doesn’t pick up. I’m halfway through writing her a text message when I realize it’s okay to need her here.

I need the support. I need comfort. I need someone to tell me everything’s going to be alright.

Because God help me, it doesn’t feel that way right now.

I can barely breathe in this dress. I raise one arm and try to get the zipper down, but it gets stuck halfway and no amount of effort can force it down.

“Fuck!” I scream, before collapsing into a fresh batch of tears.

What had I been thinking? Daniil told me plain as day who he was, what he’d done, what he might still do. And I filed that information away like it meant nothing. Like it wouldn’t have affected our lives at all, as insignificant as any other fact about him.

Daniil is tall. Daniil has brown hair. Daniil is a mob boss murderer.

I'm a fucking idiot.

I end up on the couch, with my legs hanging over the arm and my head flat against the cushions. Isla must be so scared. She must be wondering where I am, why this is happening to her.

"This is all my fault," I say to the empty house. "This is all my fault."

I set my phone on the ground next to the sofa. Every few minutes, I check to see if someone's called or texted. It's nothing more than a nervous tic, though, because the silence is deep and unbroken. All I have is this horrifying silence and desperate prayers and so much fear that it feels like this dress is shrinking by the minute and throttling me in the process.

The doorbell chimes.

I lurch to my feet and rush for the door. Emma is standing on the other side with a bottle of wine and a tub of ice cream.

"This was all I had in my fridge when you called," she explains. "But I figure, whatever this crisis is, it would call for either wine or ice cream." She steps inside and turns to me. "So which is it? Wine or ice cream?"

"I don't know what's the appropriate comfort food when your daughter's been kidnapped."

Emma just stares at me for a moment. "Um, Kinz. That's not funny."

"Good. Because I'm not joking."

Emma pales worryingly white. "What do you mean, 'She was kidnapped'? You went to a freaking dance! In a gym! With punch bowls and streamers and shit!"

"Em, I can't breathe. Can you help me get this dress off?"

She drops her pity party supplies and makes quick work of it. The zipper glides smoothly open. "Why didn't it do that when I tried?" I mumble in a stupid daze. "It kept getting stuck. It

wouldn't go. It wouldn't go, Em, it wouldn't, I swear it wouldn't.

"You're in shock," Emma says gently. She takes my hand in hers. "Honey, you're shaking."

I look down at my hands and realize that she's right. "I... I..."

She touches my chin to force my eyes up. "Hey, look at me." I do, and she nods. "Good. Now, breathe."

I try. I really do, but I can't seem to get enough air into my lungs. Nothing is working right. Not zippers, not my hands, not my own damn breath. Every single stitch of my world is coming unraveled, and I'm powerless to stop it.

A frantic tear slips down my cheek. Emma squeezes my hand. "Go to your room and change into something comfortable," she says. "I'm going to make you a strong cup of coffee. Okay?"

I nod, too overwhelmed for words.

She smiles thinly and points me toward the hallway when I don't move. "Your room is that way, love."

I nod again and totter away. When I reemerge a few minutes later in baggy flannel pajamas, Emma has two mugs of coffee waiting on the table in front of the sofa. She hands me one. I cup its heat in my palms and breathe in the scent. It's oddly grounding. But when I take a tentative sip, my stomach churns horribly.

Emma is watching me with a careful eye from her spot on the couch. It's funny—even in the worst crisis of my life, we both automatically flock to the spots we always sit in. She's got her foot tucked up under her and her head tilted to the side, the same way she always did when we used to stay up late, binging whatever weird pregnancy craving I was having and talking about the future. Back in The Dark Times.

That was hopeful, though. Scary, yes, but fundamentally helpful.

This right now? It's pure fucking despair.

The Darkest Times yet.

“Kinz, love, you’re scaring me a little. Is it true what you said about Isla?”

I nod.

“Okay, well then, you’re going to have to start from the beginning so I can follow this story.”

I breathe in the scent of my coffee and try to remember how this night began. I was so happy and hopeful and excited.

And stupid. I was so stupid.

“He came to pick us up,” I whisper, gazing at my reflection on the surface of the coffee. “We went to the school. Daniil and Isla danced while I watched, and then Isla made a friend. It looked like they were really hitting it off.”

“Okay, so far this story’s going good...”

“Then Daniil and I left the dance because—because...” Guilt and embarrassment war with one another as I try to spit out the words. “I... wanted to show him the school. I thought Isla would be okay on her own for a bit. Daniil and I... Well, what happened between us doesn’t matter. Because I got a call saying that Isla was gone. She and her friend had gone to the bathroom, and while her friend was in one of the bathroom stalls, she heard Isla scream.”

Emma’s jaw plummets down. “What?!”

“She was scared, so she hid. When she came back out again, Isla was gone.”

“So, wait, hold up. Who—I mean, what—How did—”

I look at her as my heart cracks open just a bit wider in my chest. It hurts so badly. “He knows, Em. Daniil knows exactly where Isla is and who took her.”

She shakes her head like that’ll help her make sense of things. “How could he know?”

“He told me. In the same conversation where he said I couldn’t call the cops if I wanted her to live.” I swallow hard. The bitter tang of the coffee stains my tongue, refusing to dissipate. “I don’t know what to do, Emma. How did I let this happen?”

“Hey,” Emma says fiercely, “this is not on you.”

“Are you crazy? Of course it is! Of course it is. If I hadn’t let Daniil back into our lives, this would never have happened.”

“You couldn’t have known. You had the best intentions.”

“My best intentions weren’t good enough, Emma,” I croak. “I want to believe he’ll get her back. He swore he would. But I don’t know anymore. Trusting him again feels like a mistake. Yet another naïve hope that I should have abandoned a long time ago. Add it to the fucking list.”

She reaches out and holds my hand. “He’ll bring her back. I know he will.”

Emma squeezes my fingers and we fall silent for a few minutes, those hopeful few words lingering in the air. I wish I could trust them, but they’re too speculative, too foggy for that.

“She must be so scared,” I whisper, almost choking on a sob.

“Hey, hey,” Emma says bracingly. “Stop. Don’t psych yourself out. For all we know, Isla’s perfectly safe.”

“Perfectly safe in the hands of a crazy, violent Bratva don?”

“You have your own one of those, remember? He’ll bring her back. I know he will.”

“Is that confidence or blind faith?”

“Whatever gets the job done, boo.”

I wipe away my tears and check the time on my phone. One hour, fifty-three minutes since Daniil dropped me here. It feels like time is moving in slow motion.

I pick myself up and walk over to the window. The curtains are drawn, but I peer through the thin sliver between them. I don’t expect to see anything or anyone. But I do notice the modest silver sedan parked just outside the house, halfway tucked in the shadows.

I don’t recognize it as any of the neighbors’ cars. Without even making a conscious choice, I find myself hurtling towards the door.

“Kinz?” Emma says. “Where are you going? Kinsley!”

I ignore Emma, burst through my front door, and march over to the car. The man sitting inside is reclining back and playing with his phone. His curly hair is overgrown and his face is relaxed—right up until the moment he spots me.

When he does, he jerks upright, upending the bag of Doritos he’s nursing in his free hand. I slam my fist against his window and he rolls it down immediately.

“Kinsley, I presume,” he says.

“Who the hell are you?”

He tsks. “I gotta say, that’s not the most effective way of encouraging an introduction.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Did he send you here?” I demand. “Daniil?”

“Fraid so.”

I frown. “You must be Petro.”

He grins recklessly. “So he’s mentioned me? How flattering.”

I ignore him. I’m in no mood for jokes. “Go back to wherever you came from. I don’t want you here.”

“I’m just here to make sure nothing bad happens to you. Consider me protection. Like a human condom. Nothing gets in or out.”

“Are you joking?”

“Um, well... yes,” he says dubiously. “The condom part relates to the protection part. Do you not get it?”

“I’m not talking about your dumb joke,” I hiss. “I’m talking about the fact that you’re here at all, cosplaying as a bodyguard, when you should be out looking for my daughter.”

“What was dumb about my joke? Honestly, I thought it was ___”

“Jesus,” I snap, looking up and down the street, hoping for some sign of them that I know isn’t coming. “Just get off my

property, okay? I don't want you here! The only thing I want is my daughter."

"And she'll be here," Petro answers. "Daniil will get her back. He knows what he's doing."

"If that were the case, Isla would be asleep in her own bed right now. Instead she's being held captive, used as leverage to get... what exactly?" I don't wait for him to formulate a response. "You're not going to listen to me, are you?"

"Once again, I'm afraid not. The don makes the rules."

"Isn't that demeaning, being his little puppy dog? Do you play fetch, too?" I ask bluntly. "You know what, never mind. I'm asking you one more time. Leave."

"I get it now," he says abruptly.

I arch an eyebrow. "Excuse me?"

"I get it," he repeats. "How you spun the boss's head around."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Petro fixes me with a mischievous smile. "It means he's always liked a challenge. And you, pretty lady, are a handful and a half."

I glare at him. "Tell Daniil he hasn't seen anything yet."

"I will. Word for word."

I take a deep breath and get a hold of myself. "Are you hungry or thirsty?" I ask at last.

"Oh, how nice of you to ask! Both, actually. I'd love—"

"Good," I interrupt. "Let's keep it that way."

DANIIL

“Do you have eyes on her?” I ask.

“Of course. Been out here half an hour now. The friend walked in a few minutes ago,” Petro answers. “Cute chick. Maybe a double date when all this is over?”

“I’m in no mood, Petro.”

“Right. Got it. Um, where exactly are you?”

“Where do you think?” I growl as I round a bend at high speed and almost hit an oncoming vehicle. I manage to swerve out of his way at the last moment. “I’m on my way over there.”

“There?” Petro repeats. “There as in *there*? Jesus Christ, please tell me you took backup.”

“I don’t need backup.”

“Goddammit, Dan! You can’t go in by yourself. I’m coming over right—”

“You will hold your position in front of that house,” I bark. “I need to make sure no one tries to get to Kinsley as well. I can handle the old man.”

“You *think* you can handle the old man. Tonight has proved that you underestimated him.”

“Perhaps, but I’m about to correct that mistake.”

“By walking in all on your own? That makes no goddamn sense, *sobrat!* He’s not the man we used to know. He’s an

unknown entity. And not a friendly one, either. What if he takes you hostage right alongside your daughter?”

“He still doesn’t get my Bratva, and that’s what he’s after.”

“You really think he’d go to these kinds of lengths for that?”

“The fucker’s been after this for years. He saw what I built and craves it for himself. This is his wet dream. The empire he always wanted, dropped right in his lap, and his little protégé collared up right along with it.”

He lets loose a whistling sigh. “Gregor is not a man you can persuade easily, Daniil.”

“Persuading him’ isn’t high on my to-do list. I plan to tell him how things will be. If he doesn’t like that, I’ll smash his skull in until he starts to agree.”

“I don’t like this plan, Daniil. Not one bit.”

“I have to get my daughter back, Petro.”

“I agree. But this way?” he asks incredulously.

“Stay outside that house and don’t move.”

“Meh. Fine. Call me when—”

I hang up on him and turn the last corner. It’s a straight drive from here to the Semenov compound. The place that shaped my early years and everything that followed. I haven’t been back here in over a decade now. It feels...

Long overdue.

The gates are closed. I park askew right in front of them and march over to the side gate in the corner. I don’t knock or ring the doorbell. Instead, I use my gun to blast through the lock and then I kick the door down.

It crashes to the ground in a heap of dust. The clang echoes through the silent compound, announcing my arrival. Two guards run out at me with their weapons drawn, but I act fast and shoot twice. The bullets hit the first guard in the leg and the other in the arm.

They're only flesh wounds. A few months and they'll be healed. But they do the job: both men clasp their spurting arteries and drop their weapons instantly.

"Make another move towards me, and I'll shoot to kill," I inform them. "Is that understood?"

Both men nod frantically, but I notice the one with the leg wound has rebellion in his eyes. I walk away all the same, but my finger never leaves the trigger.

When I feel movement behind me, I turn without hesitation and pull the trigger. The feisty guard drops to the floor, his skull cracking back against the rough, rock-strewn ground, blood gushing from the gaping hole where his face once was.

The second guard is still clutching his arm. He stares at his idiotic colleague with shock.

I leave him to contemplate his own mortality and resume my march up towards the house.

Everything looks so familiar. I keep expecting to wake up from a dream. But this is real. The smell in my nose, the creak of the wooden steps under my feet—those sensations are seared into a part of me that hasn't seen the light in twelve long years.

The door opens before I reach it. A dour-faced man in an ill-fitting suit sees the gun in my hand and his eyes bulge.

"Sir—"

"Don Vlasov," I correct. "I'm here to see your boss."

The butler pales. "He's... he's in his office on the second floor."

"Second floor? His office is on the first floor."

"N-not anymore, sir."

"Very well. Take me to the old man. We have business we need to discuss."

The butler twists around and leads me inside the house. The art on the walls has changed. It used to be row after row of Semenov ancestors painted in drab oils. Now, it's garish,

fleshy nudes as far as the eye can see. Something about it makes my skin crawl.

We step into an ornate, gilded elevator. The ride up is almost silent. No sounds but the groaning of ancient cogs and the terrified breathing of the man in front of me.

I make sure Monkey Suit exits the elevator first. I use him as a human shield as we move down the hallways to a room at the very end of the broad corridor. It wouldn't be out of character for Gregor to try something sly when he thinks I'm not expecting it.

"Don Semenov is inside," the butler stammers as he stops outside of a thick mahogany door.

He moves to open the door for me, but I stop him with a raise of my hand. "You're excused now. Get out of here before I end your miserable life."

He doesn't need to be told twice. He scurries away, looking back over his shoulder the entire time in case I change my mind.

When he's gone, I push the door open and walk in. Everything is white. The oaky undertones of his old office downstairs have been replaced by ivory marble, ivory sofas, ivory carpet and, for fuck's sake, a tusk of actual ivory hanging on the wall.

Gregor Semenov stands out, considering he's wearing the only bit of color in the place. A pale gray, double-breasted suit, with his signature diamond cufflinks.

"Daniil," he croons, turning to face me. "How nice of you to show up. You've been here five minutes and already, I have a man to bury."

I glance to the side and notice nine screens hoisted onto the walls in a three-by-three grid. Each one displays a different camera feed from around the house. On one, I see the man I shot at the gate being dragged towards the rear gardens.

"I did warn him."

"Well, if that's the case, all is fair in love and war, yes?"

I'm already sick of the bullshit banter. "Where is the girl, Gregor?"

He raises his eyebrows. "Eleven and a half years since you've been back here. Won't you do me the courtesy of addressing me by my rightful title?"

"If you think I'm calling you Don, then you're out of your fucking mind."

"No, not that one."

"Then no," I snarl. "I won't."

Gregor sighs noisily. "You were always so stubborn. Too rebellious to be reined in and too stubborn to be taught."

"I was done being your student."

"I wasn't done teaching you," he growls right back. His eyes flatten with anger, but he smiles with some effort. "Take a seat."

"I'd rather stand."

"A drink then?"

"This is not a social call. I came here for a reason."

"That's right," Gregor says with a slow nod. "You came here for the little girl. Isla, isn't it? Pretty name. Pretty girl."

It takes all my strength to keep my hands from balling into fists. "She has nothing to do with this. Release her to me and ___"

He raises a hand to cut me off. "But who are you to her? Her friend, mentor, teacher? Perhaps her... father?"

"She's the daughter of a friend."

"Yes, I've seen the friend you're referring to. Beautiful woman as well. Pretty green eyes. Nice ass." I take one furious step forward, but it only makes him chuckle. "You may be a don now in your own right, but you still have a lot to learn."

I take a deep breath to steel myself. He's trying to goad me. The crazy part is that it's working. My reservoir of calm has burned up in an instant. Although, where Isla and Kinsley are

involved, I didn't have much to begin with. The mere thought of him touching them makes me see red.

"Where is she?"

He tucks his hands into his pockets and saunters out from behind his desk. "I have every intention of returning the girl to you, Daniil. I don't want to harm a child. But in order to get her back, you'll have to be honest with me."

"What do you want to know?"

"Who is her father?"

"You already know the answer to that."

"I do," he says with a satisfied smile. "But I'd like to hear it from you."

I close my eyes and breathe softly. "I'm her father." The words feel so strange coming from my lips. Right, but strange.

Gregor smiles. "Congratulations. I'm impressed you managed to hide the fact for so long."

My eyelids rip open. "If you've hurt her..."

He looks shocked that I would even suggest such a thing. "Hurt her? No, of course not! I would never. She is a part of the family now, Daniil. *Our* family."

"There is no family, Gregor," I snap. "There is you and your Bratva. There's me and mine."

"Which are soon to be one."

"And why would I agree to that?"

"Because," he says simply, "it's the only way you're going to get your daughter back."

I stiffen in place as rage ripples through my body. He's bartering with me. My daughter for my Bratva. This is the opportunity he's been waiting for this past decade.

"What are your terms?"

Gregor smiles. "Simple. We join our Bratvas together. There will be no delineation between them. They will act as one entity, under one don."

“Let me guess: you?”

“For the time being,” he suggests in a voice that says, *This is all so reasonable; how could you ever refuse?* “But I will not live forever.”

“At the rate you’re going, that’s truer than you know,” I snarl under my breath.

“Don’t be so testy. It will all be yours one day. The question you need to decide is this: would you rather be my Vor with a daughter? Or a don, but without one?”

Motherfucker. My breath whistles in and out of my nose. My jaw hurts from clenching so tight, and every muscle in my body is squeezed to the maximum. But there is only one way out of this. Only one way forward.

“I want my daughter,” I rasp. “Everything else is secondary.”

Gregor’s smile splits unsettlingly wide, like a Cheshire cat. “Excellent. Follow me.”

He leads me out of his ridiculous white office and halfway down the hall, to an oak door with brass studs. A very familiar oak door.

“Are you kidding me?” I growl.

He glances behind his shoulder. “What?” he asks innocently. “Feeling a little nostalgic, Daniil?”

“This passive-aggressive bullshit might have worked on me once,” I hiss. “But not anymore.”

We walk through the oak door. There are two people in there, but neither one is Isla. I turn my back on the guards and glare at Gregor.

“Are you trying to piss me off?”

“Something tells me the ship’s already sailed on that one. She’s in the adjoining room.” He nods to one of his goons and he heads towards the identical oak door adjacent to the one we just walked through.

I spot the black carpet in the center of the space. The same one that graced the marble floors eleven years ago. The red stain is

still there if you know where to look. Fuck me—after all this time, it's still there.

Her blood still smeared on the carpet, and this sick bastard has it displayed like a piece of art.

“I’ve always liked this room,” Gregor muses, as though we’re in the middle of a pleasant conversation while he tours me through his house.

I so desperately want to punch the smile off this asshole. But before I can weigh the cost of such a reckless, impulsive move when my daughter’s safety is still hanging in the balance, the door opens and the guard re-enters.

“Daniil!” Isla gasps the moment she sees me.

She rushes at me, relief coloring her flushed features. I grab her and pull her into my arms. She’s too old to be carried, but she clings to me like it’s second nature.

“Well, isn’t that a heart-warming sight?” Gregor sighs, his eyes boring holes in my face.

I glare at him. “Give us a moment.”

He raises his eyebrows, and I can tell he’s contemplating saying no. But in the end, he gives me a nod and leaves the room with a click of his fingers. His goons follow.

I can feel her little hands on my neck, like she’s scared I might let go. When the door’s shut, I pull back so that I can see her face.

“Are you okay?” I ask urgently. “Are you hurt?”

She shakes her head.

“I need to hear your voice, Isla.”

She touches my face tenderly. I can see a crenellation of gray amidst the hazel in her eyes. “I’m okay, Papa.”

Papa. She’s never called me that before. It fits. It probably shouldn’t, but it does.

“What happened at the school?”

“Molly and I went to the bathroom together,” she says. “We were having a nice time. But then, while I was washing my hands this man entered the bathroom. He was really... big. He told me to be quiet but I screamed. Then... he took me. My eyes were blindfolded and they put something in my mouth so I couldn’t scream. When I could see again, I was here. I mean, in another room, but in this house.”

I set her down slowly and take a good look at her. She does look okay. Unharmed, as far as I can tell, and relatively calm.

“Papa, who’s that man?”

“I’ll explain everything to you one day, *dorogaya*. But first, we’re leaving.”

I take her hand and tow her through the door. There’s no one on the other side, but I’m not foolish enough to believe that there are no eyes on us.

We make our way back towards the elevator. Isla stays close to my side, her head tucked underneath my arm. When the elevator doors open on the ground floor, there still doesn’t seem to be anyone around.

Until...

“Leaving so soon?”

Isla jumps and cringes into my side. I push her behind me and turn to Gregor. He’s standing a few feet from the door, at the threshold of another arched corridor that leads to a labyrinth of rooms, most of which are probably still echoing with the screams of the people whose lives have ended inside of them. Some of those lives I ended myself.

“I got what I came here for.”

His smile stays in place, but I can sense his uncertainty. Allowing me to walk out of here with Isla is a sign of faith on his part. It’s a gesture he’s hoping will win back my trust. But he can’t be sure of it.

His eyes dip to Isla, whose face is half-hidden behind my back. “The girl is lovely. We’re friends now, aren’t we, Isla?”

Her hands tighten on my hip, but she nods reluctantly.

“See?” Gregor says. “We’re friends. So there’s no reason you can’t come back and see me again. Isn’t that right, Isla? You enjoyed the treats that we prepared for you?”

She nods again. I note a tiny smear of sugar at the corner of her mouth. It makes me sick to my stomach.

I glare at him. “*Khvatit igrat’s rebenkom.*”

“I’m not toying with her,” he says, refusing to switch to Russian. “I simply want to get to know my granddaughter better.”

“Then why didn’t you just come and say hi?” Isla speaks out suddenly. “You shouldn’t have taken me the way you did.”

Gregor’s eyes go wide with surprise, then he laughs. “Aren’t you a brave young thing? Just like your father.”

“Why did you take me?” she asks again.

“Because I could,” Gregor says. “And because I wanted to make a point to your dear papa. No matter how much he tries to hide from me, I’ll always find out the truth.”

“But... who are you?”

“You want to tell her, Daniil. Or shall I?”

“Come on, Isla,” I tell her. “We’re leaving now.”

“Very well; I’ll leave it to you. But don’t forget your promise, Daniil,” Gregor calls at my retreating back. “If you do, I’ll have to remind you. And when I do, I’d love to meet Isla’s darling mother as well.”

It’s not exactly a subtle threat, but I keep walking. I don’t rise to the bait. My only priority is getting Isla back to Kinsley.

As we approach the gate, I see a puddle of thick, sticky blood where the guard I shot died. Before Isla can spot it, I scoop her up into my arms and press her face into the hollow of my neck. She doesn’t need to see that shit. I grew up long before I had to, in the house of horrors behind us. I won’t let her suffer the same fate.

We hustle through the broken gate and back to my car. I put her in the passenger seat, make sure she’s buckled and then I

get into the driver's seat. I stay alert, waiting for the other shoe to drop, but none of Gregor's men come out of the woodwork. Neither does he.

Only after I'm sure we won't be followed do I start driving. Isla sits limply against the passenger seat, playing with the folds of her dress. For a long time, she's quiet.

Then she sucks in a breath and looks over at me. "I didn't like his smile. The man in the gray suit."

"No," I sigh. "Me neither."

She nods. "Mommy used to tell me that you can tell a lot about a person by their smile. Some people smile with their eyes; some smile with their teeth. Some can be smiling on the outside but not on the inside. That man... His eyes weren't smiling. Just his mouth. And he looked like a wolf."

"Yeah," I say. "That's exactly what he is."

And I'm gonna skin him alive.

KINSLEY

“He should be here by now.”

“We don’t know what’s happened,” cautions Emma.

“Right,” I drawl in a voice that’s half-deadbeat and half-devastated. “Like, we don’t know if Isla’s dead, and Daniil’s dead, and you and I are next.”

“Kinz, I know you’re upset, but—”

“They have my daughter!” I all but scream. “They have my daughter, Emma. They have my fucking daughter.”

Emma comes up and wraps her arms around me. “Hey now, calm down. Take a deep breath. In and out.”

I try, but it just won’t come. It’s like my body doesn’t know how to operate without Isla nearby. Without Daniil nearby. The things I’ve come to rely on have been pulled out from under me, and in their absence, all I can do is fall.

KNOCK-KNOCK-KNOCK.

“Oh my God!” I throw Emma off me and bolt to the door. “He came! He has her! He’s—”

I freeze abruptly when I yank the door open and come face to face with Petro. My eyes narrow into slits and I cross my arms over my chest. “You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me.”

He fidgets, eyes downcast between his feet. “Can I, uh... use your bathroom?” He sees my incredulous face and winces. “Sorry. I had a Big Gulp with me and I made the mistake of drinking the whole thing. I coulda snuck around back and

watered your bushes, but I figured this was more polite. Politer? No, more polite.”

I’m torn between kicking him in the balls and slamming the door in his face. Before I can make up my mind, Emma intervenes.

“Honey, I know you’re under a lot of stress right now. And you have every right to be. But the man just wants to use the bathroom.”

“Pick a fucking tree!” I splutter, waving my arms around like a lunatic.

Emma rubs my shoulders. “She’s upset,” she murmurs to Petro. “Go ahead.”

“Thank you,” he says, pressing his palms together and bowing.

He dashes past me and makes a right down the hall. I grimace and look at the clock on the wall over her shoulder. Time keeps slipping past, faster and faster. My hope is starting to dwindle. In its place is the cold, sucking void of despair.

“You don’t have to worry, you know.”

That’s Petro, coming back from the bathroom and adjusting his fly as he emerges.

“That was a fast pee,” Emma says.

“I was like a fire hydrant back there.”

“Ew. Wash your hands.”

He smirks and saunters over to the kitchen sink to clean up. “As I was saying, you don’t have to worry. If anyone can get your girl back, it’s Daniil.”

“So that means that if he can’t, no one can?”

Petro frowns as he puzzles through that one. That’s all it takes for the fear to turn to cement in my belly. Emma’s grip tightens on my hand, but I can’t find any comfort in her touch.

And then we hear the sound of an approaching car.

Petro is the first to grin. “Told ya he’d come.”

I rush out into the night and get to the car before it's even come to a complete stop. Daniil is in the driver's seat with Isla slumped next to him, her eyes closed in sleep.

"Oh God," I gasp. "Isla!"

Daniil just holds his finger up to his lips. He steps out of the car, and I'm on him immediately. "Is she okay? What did that bastard do to her? Is she—"

"She's sleeping, Kinsley," he says softly. "It was a tough night and a long way home. Give me a minute to get her into her own bed."

He cradles Isla carefully in his arms and walks into the house. I can see Emma's lips moving when we enter the house. It's a habit she inherited from her grandma.

Prayer.

Daniil bypasses both Emma and Petro and heads for the bathroom. I follow behind him and watch him lay her down on the bed. His tenderness chips away at the concrete pit in my stomach. Just slightly, but it's a start.

When he steps back, I sink to my knees at the side of her bed, take her hand, and stare at her face. She looks so much younger when she sleeps. That ever-present worry line in her forehead is smoothed out.

I kiss her knuckles, leaving tears where my lips were. "Thank God," I whisper to myself. "Thank God."

Daniil doesn't disturb me. He just stands by the door and watches me watch her. For ten or fifteen or twenty minutes, he doesn't say a word.

When I finally straighten up, the tears have dried on my cheeks and my knees ache in protest. I slip out into the hallway and pull the door closed halfway behind me.

"Em?" I call gently.

"Yes?" she says, sticking her head out from right around the corner. She must've been waiting. I'm surprised she lasted this long.

“Can you stay with Isla, please? I just... I don’t want her to be alone.”

“Of course,” she says. “No worries.”

She floats into Isla’s room and Daniil and I head into the living room, where Petro is standing by the window, peering out into the street.

“Suburbia is such a fuckin’ drag,” he observes with a scrunched-up nose. “Can’t believe people actually live like this. And speaking of stuff I can’t believe... can’t believe you pulled this shit off, boss.”

I glance at Daniil, who is as stony-faced as he was when he first arrived. His lips are pursed tight.

“Anyone want to tell me what the hell is going on?” I demand.

“I spoke to her, *sladkaya*.” He turns to me. “She’s shaken, of course. But she’s stronger and braver than either one of us gave her credit for.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning she’s okay.”

I frown. “Then you and I have very different understandings of the word ‘okay.’ She was kidnapped. In the middle of her school dance. Her friend heard her screaming.”

“She’s not a baby, Kinsley.”

“She’s not an adult, either.”

“Look, guys, I hate to break up this fight,” Petro says, gliding in between the two of us. “But we need to focus on the important details here, not relitigate whatever trauma bonding you lovebirds have to work through. Dan, what happened when you got there?”

Daniil sighs and leans against the wall, arms folded over his chest. “I forced myself through the side gate and walked right into the house. He was expecting me. Isla was being kept in a separate room in the mansion, but I was taken to Gregor’s office first. He wanted to discuss terms with me.”

I don't immediately register that Daniil has said something alarming. It's only Petro's reaction that makes me aware of it.

"You're joking. Terms. Fuck. *Terms*. What kind of terms?"

"The same ones he's always wanted."

Petro pinches his nose with his fingers. "And if she's here, safe and sound in her own bed, that means you said..."

"You know what it means."

He raises his eyes. For once, his voice has no laughter in it. It's a hollow croak. "Brother, what have you done?"

"Exactly what I had to do," Daniil responds viciously. No remorse. No second-guessing. "I went there tonight to get my daughter back. That's what I achieved."

"At the cost of your Bratva!"

"Stop!" I yell, loud enough to get both men's attention. "Will someone please tell me what is going on? Why is Petro going into hysterics?"

Petro answers first. "Because your man here just handed over his Bratva to the sadistic bastard that we broke away from ten years ago."

I turn to Daniil. "You did *what*?"

He blinks. It's the only sign of inner turmoil. Everything else about him is as stoic and chiseled from rock as ever. "It was the only thing he wanted. I get Isla back, and he gets to unite the Semenov and the Vlasov Bratvas under one banner. Under one leader."

Petro balls up his fists and presses them against his forehead. "You know what that means, don't you?" he says. "He'll expect you to stand by again while he does whatever the hell he wants. And you'll be expected to nod, agree, and see his orders through."

"I'm aware."

"You swore you'd never trust the man again."

"And the same still stands."

“Then how could you agree to his terms?” Petro asks, exasperated. “The men of the Vlasov Bratva pledged their allegiance to you. They’re not going to take kindly to following Gregor’s orders again. It’ll make you look weak.”

“You’re continuing to tell me things I already know, *sobrat*. The important thing is that my daughter is back home. She’s safe.”

Petro swings his hands around in frustration. His panic is palpable. “You think she’ll remain safe with Gregor in charge?” he asks. “He’s always going to use her as bait, as leverage, as whatever he needs to. You just proved that it’s a good way to get shit done. To make your stubborn ass fall in line.”

I glance at Daniil, waiting for him to say something. But he seems lost in thought. Either that, or resigned to his fate. I wonder if he even has a choice anymore.

“Protest all you want, Petro; it’s already done,” he sighs eventually. “The promise has been made. But that doesn’t mean I intend to see it through.”

Petro stops short. “Are you saying—No. No fucking way.”

“Like I said, I did what I had to do. I told him what he wanted to hear.”

“Hold on,” I say, trying to wrap my head around what’s happening. “Are you trying to tell me that you don’t intend to hold up your end of the bargain?”

Daniil nods. “That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

I shake my head. “Then you’re putting Isla back in danger. If you go back on your word, he’s going to get to you through her.”

“Now, you’re starting with the ‘tell-me-shit-I-already-know’?”

“So we’re just sitting ducks, is that it?” I explain, fisting my hair. “Petro parks outside my house and just never leaves?”

“No.”

“Then what?”

“We all leave.”

I frown. “Excuse me?”

Daniil steps forward and palms my shoulders. “It’s not safe for you or Isla here anymore, *sladkaya*,” he says quietly. “Gregor knows where you work, where you live. He knows too much. And I’ll be damned if he’s going to use the two of you again.”

“So you want us to run.” I shake my head immediately. “No. Not happening.”

“Kinsley—”

“No!” I snap, shaking him off of me. “I have a life here. Isla has a life here. I have a job. Friends—”

“You have one friend,” Daniil interrupts. “And she knows what’s at stake. She’s not going to blame you for leaving.”

“But my job. I have a—”

“A job that you were going to quit anyway. You don’t need to work. I will take care of you.”

I stumble backwards until I bump into the wall behind me. “I’m not going to be dependent on you, Daniil.”

“Why not?”

“Because... because...”

Somehow, he’s suddenly an inch from me, looking down at me with his cool blue eyes. They’re mesmerizing. Hypnotizing, in the truest sense of the word. I feel as if they go on forever and ever and I’m just tumbling in their depths like an astronaut lost in space.

“Once Gregor is no longer a threat, I’ll bring you back.”

“There has to be another way to do this,” I croak.

“There isn’t.” He tilts his head to the side. Almost like he’s getting ready to kiss me. “I know this is a lot, but it is also the only way I can ensure your safety. And Isla’s safety.”

“I’m not ready for this,” I whisper. “It’s all too much, too soon. It was already too much. *You* were already too much.”

“You may not be ready,” Daniil says, “but Isla has been ready to leave for a long time. She’s floundering in this town, Kinsley. Drowning in it. Show her that there are places in the world where she can feel free. Take her on an adventure.”

“Adventure,” I scoff under my breath. “Another word we have very different definitions of.”

He doesn’t say anything. Just regards me with that skewering gaze, which is somehow worse than anything he could possibly say. It does all the convincing for him. There’s no denying that gaze. No resisting it.

It’s do what he says, or die. Not much of a choice.

“When do we leave?” I ask.

“As soon as you’re done packing.”

“What?” I gasp, staring up at him in disbelief. “You want to leave now? It’s the middle of the night!”

“There’s no point postponing this. Gregor’s men will descend in the morning and then getting out will be ten times as hard. It’s now or never.”

Now or never.

My stomach twists into heavy knots. “I think I have to throw up.”

KINSLEY

My knees give way. I'd have cracked them open on the floor if Daniil didn't catch me first. He sets me back on my feet, but his arm stays looped around my waist. "You okay?"

"What do you think?" I snap. "You're making this a habit."

"Causing nausea?"

"Knocking me off-course. Pulling the rug out from underneath me."

His eyes burn in their sockets, impossibly bright. He doesn't breathe a word.

"Just tell me something, please," I plead quietly. "Just give me one morsel of information so I can pretend like my life isn't spiraling completely out of my control. Just tell me where we're going at the very least, for God's sake."

He sighs like I'm the one being difficult. "That's not important for you to know right now. You'll know when we get there."

"Why?" I say, my voice cracking. I don't even have the energy to yell anymore. It's all been siphoned out of me. "Why shouldn't I know?"

"Because the less you know, the less you'll be able to share with anyone."

"Who would I share that information with? Do you think your ex-boss and I are in a group chat together?"

Petro inserts himself in the conversation with a sheepish smile. "The delightful young woman in your daughter's bedroom, for

one.”

I frown. “Emma’s different. She’s family. I have to tell her where we’re going.”

“No,” Daniil interjects, “you don’t. That’s exactly the point.”

I whirl on him in pure disbelief. “You mean—”

“You’ll have to say your goodbyes tonight, *sladkaya*.”

I’m shaking my head before he’s even finished with his sentence. “No! No, I’m not agreeing to that. No way in hell.”

He’s unflinching, though. Unyielding. “You have to. We have to become invisible. It defeats the purpose if you keep checking in on your friend.”

“She’ll be worried sick about us.”

“You’ll be with me. She’ll have nothing to worry about.”

“But—”

He steps closer, swallowing up my entire field of vision. He’s all I can see. “Chances are that Gregor is going to have eyes on her, Kinsley. If he does, then you’re risking our location every time you so much as breathe her name. You’re risking her life, too. Is that a risk you want to take?”

I feel like I might fall to my knees again. “I’ve said goodbye to too many people,” I whisper. “Don’t make me say goodbye to Emma, too. She’s all I have left.”

“It’s temporary. And it’s non-negotiable. Now, go pack. We’re wasting time.”

He turns to Petro, effectively dismissing me in my own home, and the two of them start whispering in rapid Russian. As I look at his broad back, I marvel at the idea that he ever took orders from another man. He doesn’t seem physically capable of it. Violently allergic to the very thought.

With a sigh, I turn to do as he said. I crack Isla’s door open a smidge as I pass by. Emma is wide awake, sitting on the carpet by Isla’s bed, flipping through one of Isla’s old sketchbooks. I gesture for her to follow me and then I head to my bedroom.

“Hey,” she says, slipping into my room behind me. “They’re still here?”

“In the living room,” I reply. “Would you mind closing the door?”

The moment it clicks shut, she turns to me impatiently. “Okay, Kinz, what the hell is going on? I tried eavesdropping for a bit but I only got snippets. I did hear the word ‘war’ a few too many times for my liking.”

“They’re talking about a mafia war. Or, Bratva war, I guess.”

“Oh, that’s much better,” she says sarcastically. “Are you and Isla going to be caught in the crosshairs of this dick-measuring contest?”

“No.”

She breathes a sigh of relief and slumps against the wall. “Oh, thank God, because I was just—”

“We’re leaving, Emma.”

“We? As in you and me, or...?” She trails off when she sees the expression on my face. “That’s not the ‘us’ you’re referring to, is it?”

I shake my head sadly. “No. It’s not.”

She swallows audibly. “Okay, let’s start from the beginning.”

“Daniil essentially made a deal with Gregor Semenov to get Isla back. He promised to ally his Bratva with Gregor’s.”

“That sounds like—”

“Except that he doesn’t actually intend to keep his promise.”

“Oh, fuck,” Emma gasps, looking immediately panicked. “I’m no mafia expert, but that sounds... bad.”

I nod in agreement. “That’s why we’re leaving. Isla, Daniil, and me. But don’t worry, okay? Daniil’s men will protect you, so you don’t have to—”

“For fuck’s sake, Kinz,” Emma snaps more viciously than I’ve ever heard from her before, “I’m not worried about *myself*.”

What about you and Isla? What about your job? What about this house? What about your whole entire life?"

"I might not have much of one if I stay," I say softly. "And I can't afford to risk Isla."

"There must be another way."

"There isn't."

She opens her mouth, then lets it fall closed. She does that a few more times. Each time she does, the silence feels like it thickens more and more until I can barely breathe.

This is so much harder than it should be. Not just this moment with Emma, but all of the horrible moments I've already slogged through. Not to mention all the horrible moments yet to come.

"Will you say something?" I beg when the silence becomes too much for me.

"What do you want me to say?" she rasps. "That I'll miss you? That I can't imagine not seeing you guys every day? That I wish this wasn't happening?"

"I'm sorry, Em."

She surges forward and takes my hand. "Don't be sorry," she urges. "None of this is your fault."

"I sure know how to pick 'em, don't I?" It's a feeble attempt at making light of the whole situation, and my voice sounds pathetic even to my own ears.

"I'm not sure you had much of a choice."

"What do you mean?"

She sighs and gestures towards my bed. "Let's sit down. I'm exhausted."

We sit down side by side and she collapses back onto the mattress. I follow suit, feeling yet another strong sense of déjà vu. How many times have we had conversations in exactly these positions over the years? Too many to count.

Never with so much at stake, though.

“Since this might be the last real conversation you and I have for a while, I might as well say what I need to say.”

I’m instantly nervous. “Okay. Shoot.”

“You need to be kinder to yourself, Kinz,” she says gently. “I get that you’ve been through tough times, but blaming yourself is not an option anymore.”

“But—”

She holds up a finger to stop me. “I know what you’re gonna say: you choose the wrong men. First, your dad, though you obviously didn’t exactly ‘choose’ him. Then Tom, then Daniil, then Daniil again.”

“It’s not exactly a glowing track record,” I mutter.

“I’m not saying you don’t have responsibility. I just think that you throw guilt on top of it, and it makes everything feel worse.”

I frown. “I’m not following.”

Emma props herself up on one elbow and looks down at me tenderly. “Let me put this another way: Do you regret it? And by ‘it,’ I mean any of it. Do you regret taking Daniil to the dance tonight? Do you regret letting him meet Isla in the first place? Do you regret that night in the woods? Do you regret running from Tom, when that’s what led you here?”

I’m about to say, *Of course I regret it all; look at what my life has become!* But then I stop short and really think about the answer.

Not so long ago, I really thought I knew. I thought it was a firm and resounding yes. *I regret all of it.*

But now...

Maybe I’ve been so obsessed with convincing myself I regret everything that I haven’t paused to realize that beneath that heaped-on regret is gratitude.

I’m *glad* I ran in my wedding dress.

I’m *glad* I fell off that bridge.

I'm *glad* Daniil saved me, and I'm glad that he gave me Isla, and I'm even glad he disappeared for so long, because it taught me how to be strong and fierce and protect my little girl.

So can I be regretful that he's back now, and that I let him into our lives?

The answer is obvious: no, I can't.

I'm glad for Daniil Vlasov.

Even if it's about to kill me.

I sigh when my thoughts end up right where Emma knew they would. "You think you know me so well."

"Like the back of my hand, baby."

I let my eyes go unfocused, the popcorn ceiling overhead morphing into fantastical shapes like I'm cloud-gazing. "I can't imagine actually saying bye to you, Em."

"It's not forever."

"You sound like him now."

"Maybe he's right."

"And if he's not?"

"How about just for today, we do something shocking and have a little faith?"

I smile. "Faith, huh? You're starting to sound like a broken record."

Emma doesn't laugh or make a joke for once. It's strange to see her so solemn and serious. "If my grandma taught me anything, it's that the hardest time to have faith is precisely the time you need it most. You'll get through this, Kinsley Whitlow. So will that little princess down the hall. And maybe, at the end of the road, you might just have yourself the family you've always wanted."

Before I can even begin to wrap my head around the thought of light at the end of the tunnel, the door swings open and Petro is standing there at the threshold. "Hey, ladies. Don't

you two look cozy on that bed? Might be room for one more, though...”

I roll my eyes. “Haven’t you heard of knocking?”

“Fine. Rain check on the threesome then. Anyway, I’ve been sent to make sure you’re packing.”

“Aw, look at that,” Emma coos condescendingly. “So well-trained. Do you do everything your master tells you to? Do you shake and play dead?”

“Mhmm. I also piss on fire hydrants and hump anything female in my vicinity. I’d keep your distance if I were you.”

“Don’t have to tell me twice,” mutters Emma.

Another silhouette darkens the hallway over Petro’s shoulder. He yelps and slides aside to make room for Daniil.

“You’re supposed to be packing,” Daniil tells me in a taut, low rumble. “We’re leaving in half an hour.”

“Isla’s sleeping.”

“Pack her essentials. I’ll carry her to the car when we’re ready to go.”

“Going where, exactly?” I try again, even though I know he’s never going to answer.

Daniil’s eyes slide to Emma and then back to me. “Twenty-nine minutes,” is all he says. Then he turns and stomps away.

KINSLEY

There's something eerie about the dawn when you haven't slept. I've been up all night as we drove out of the city and into that extra-dark darkness that hangs over the nowhere between rural places. Now, the first fingers of morning light are coming up over the spindly treetops, and it's setting my teeth on edge.

I'm hungry, too, which isn't helping matters. Irritable and hungry and exhausted and helpless.

"Am I allowed to know where we're going now?" I demand. "We've been driving for hours. Emma's far behind us and you stole my phone the moment we left."

"I thought we'd agreed to make this a silent drive."

"We can go back to the silence just as soon as you answer my question."

He sighs. "It's a safehouse," he says at last. "That's all I can tell you."

My stomach rumbles loudly enough for Daniil to hear. He eyes me with an arched brow, one corner of his mouth twitching in something almost like a smile. "There is food in the glove compartment," he says, pointing with his chin.

I pop it open and find a horde of candy. I pluck out the Twizzlers, rip the bag open like a chimpanzee, and shove three in my mouth right away. As soon as the sugar hits my taste buds, I let out a long-held breath.

"You're well-stocked," I remark as I chew.

“This is Petro’s car,” he explains. “Candy is one of his many vices.”

“I like him a little better now.”

“I’ll be sure to tell him.”

“On second thought, don’t. I’d prefer he didn’t know.”

He smiles subtly while I devour half the bag like sugar’s going out of style. “You’ll wake Isla up with all that chomping.”

“I’ve decided I’m going to get fat on this adventure,” I say brattily. “I’m just gonna eat and eat and eat until I’m a whale and you have to buy a forklift to move me anywhere. I mean, what else do I have to do? No job, no life, no purpose.”

“What about Isla?” he asks. “She’s not purpose enough?”

I scowl at him. “I’d really appreciate it if you stop hitting me with reasonable logic. It’s very annoying. And I’m not nearly full enough.” I pull out a sleeve of Oreos and go to town.

“Good?” asks Daniil, which makes me realize I’ve been moaning out loud.

“Passable,” I mumble through a mouth full of chocolate.

“You sound like you’re about to come.”

“Ha-ha-ha.”

“It wasn’t a joke. I would know.”

“Will you be quiet?” I hiss.

He checks the rearview mirror. “She’s fast asleep, Kinsley.”

“Yeah, well, I hear getting kidnapped can really tire you out.”

He doesn’t snipe back like I expect him to. He just keeps driving, his eyes focused on the road, though something says his attention is really centered on me.

“You have every right to be pissed off,” he says at last.

I almost choke on my eighth Oreo. “That’s a change of tune,” I say. “You’ve been making me feel like the lone lunatic for most of this nightmare so far.”

“Maybe I’m pissed, too.”

“With yourself?”

“With many things.”

“Care to share?”

“Nope.”

I bite into another cookie because it’s the only stress reliever I have at the moment. Even though I’m way past the satisfied phase and venturing into the so-bloated-I-never-want-to-eat-again phase.

“Right, of course,” I say. “Because you can’t be honest with me no matter how much I open up to you.”

“I didn’t realize that this was a transactional relationship.”

“It’s not a relationship at all,” I point out. “You show up and throw my life into chaos, and I spend the next decade trying to pick up the pieces. So we’re right on track.”

“No, *sladkaya*,” he murmurs, more to himself than to me. “We’re not on track at all.”



Half an hour later, we pull up at the mouth of a dirt road that winds into barren country.

“This does not look right,” I say, frowning.

“It’s right,” he says simply. He guides us down the path, taking every bump so slowly that I’m about to ask what the hell he’s dawdling for before I realize that he’s trying not to wake Isla.

At the end of the road is a neat little house with a wraparound front porch, tucked way back in the woods. When Daniil parks, Isla stirs in the back seat and her eyes flicker open.

“Mom?”

I dust my hands hurriedly, spraying cookie crumbs everywhere, before I twist around in my seat. “Hey, baby, are you okay? Did you sleep okay?”

“Where am I?” she mumbles, disoriented. “I had a weird dream.”

Her eyelids are still heavy. They close on me a few times. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. You go back to sleep, okay? I’m right here.”

The side door opens and Daniil gently lifts Isla into his arms. “Papa?” she whispers. The word sends goosebumps erupting all over my body.

Daniil doesn’t seem at all fazed, though. He just shuts the door with his foot and carries her into the house, leaving me to follow behind. I don’t miss how comfortably she tucks her face into the crook of his neck. How easily she drifts back to sleep.

She feels safe with him.

If only I could feel the same.

I follow in Daniil’s footsteps, but as he walks the porch steps up towards the door, it opens. I recoil at once.

The man standing inside the house looks shady as hell. He’s wearing a cutoff shirt stained with sweat and cigarette burns. Several silver chains hang from his neck and several more cheap, chunky rings adorn his fingers.

His eyes never sit still for long. They skitter over me, curious and perceptive. I fold my arms over my chest like it’ll stop him from seeing whatever he’s looking for.

“Boss,” he greets. “Everything’s ready for you.”

“Good. You can go.”

The man lingers, though. We brush past him—I make sure to keep my distance—and enter the house. Daniil goes right for the stairs, taking them two at a time, but I linger in the foyer.

“Nice house,” I observe. It’s simple but clean and well-furnished.

“It’s not mine,” the guy says. His eyes keep scaling up and down my body without reservation. It’s making me uncomfortable, but I don’t want to show him that he’s getting

to me. He strikes me as the kind of man who jumps on weakness as soon as he sees it.

“What’s your name?” I ask.

“Who’s asking?”

“Um, Kinsley.”

“Weird name.”

I frown. “I guess it’s a little unusual. What’s yours?”

“Rat.”

I laugh out loud. “Maybe not so unusual, after all.”

“It’s a nickname,” he says defensively.

“I figured your parents weren’t cruel enough to print that on your birth certificate. Do you have a real one?”

“Mathew,” he says with obvious reluctance. “No one calls me that, though.”

“Rat definitely suits you better.”

He flashes me a middle finger, but he tucks it away in a frantic hurry when he hears Daniil’s footsteps growing louder on the second floor landing. Before I can say anything, he vanishes out through the door.

“One of your minions?” I ask Daniil as he descends the stairs.

“Unconventional, but his heart’s in the right place,” Daniil replies, watching Rat’s retreating form through the smoked glass front door. He yawns and takes a seat on the bottom stair.

“Is the Terminator actually sleepy?” I ask in amazement. “I didn’t realize you were human after all.”

He smirks. “Just barely. Don’t hold it against me.”

It’s the first time I’ve felt some semblance of calm since we were together in the biology lab at Crestmore. The first time my heart has climbed down back to something resembling normal. It’s hard to believe how little time has passed since then. Less than a full day, but it feels like centuries.

“You’re dead on your feet, *sladkaya*,” he says gently. “Go get some sleep.”

I chew at my lip for a moment. “I’m scared to,” I admit.

Daniil reaches out to lace his fingers through mine. “We’re safe here. I promise.”

“I thought we were safe last night at the dance. Jesus, was that really last night?”

He laughs humorlessly. “Welcome to the Bratva. Time moves differently here.”

I frown. “I didn’t ask to be a part of it. I don’t want to be Rat.”

“You’re not Rat and you never will be, a fact for which I’m glad on multiple levels. Now, go and sleep. That’s an order.”

I’d laugh if I had the energy, but that’s long since gone. I leave Daniil where he’s sitting and climb the stairs one at a time. The first bedroom on the right has its door cracked open. I peek inside to see Isla tucked into the bed.

I slide off my shoes, pad across the room, and slide in behind her. When I close my eyes, it suddenly feels impossible to ever open them up again.

I lose consciousness to the images of porch swings and black knights with shimmering eyes. Slanting sunlight and a massive, whiskery rat wearing silver chains and chunky silver rings.

DANIIL

I can feel something creeping up to the bed. Someone, rather.

Someone that's trying to be quiet, but can't seem to avoid the creaks in each individual floorboard. Someone inexperienced and awkward. Someone who's spent a decade running away from danger, not inching up toward it.

My hand wraps around the hilt of the blade tucked underneath my pillow. My eyes bolt open and I jerk upright, arm poised to strike.

“AAARGHHH!” she screams.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Kinsley,” I growl.

She's standing just out of knife's reach, her body frozen in shock, her eyes trained on the steely glint of my blade. For a long time, she doesn't say a damn thing. She's still wearing the same jeans and off-shoulder white t-shirt she drove here in. The glow of the moonlight in the hollow of her throat is mesmerizing.

“You sleep with a knife under your pillow?” she asks at last. “I thought you said it was safe here.”

“It is. I always sleep with a knife under my pillow.”

“I... I need to sit down. My life just flashed before my eyes, and I hated almost every second of it,” she says, looking around the room for a chair. When she finds none, she moves to the bed and knocks my legs aside. She plants herself at my feet, hugs her knees up to her chest, and takes a deep breath.

“You scared the crap out of me.”

“What are you doing in my room?”

“We need to talk.”

I grimace. “This can’t wait until morning?”

“If I don’t get to sleep, neither do you.”

Sighing, I let the knife fall with a soft thump onto my pillow.

“Tell me what’s bothering you.”

“Everything,” she answers at once, squirming in place. My eyes focus on her bare shoulder and the sharp cut of her collarbone. Honestly, men focus on ass and tits, but nothing is as sexy as collarbones on a woman. On *this* woman, to be specific.

“We left in the middle of the night. I didn’t have time to... to make calls, write letters, explain myself.”

“Jesus,” I groan. “It’s too late for this shit.”

“Well, tough. I’m still processing this nightmare, and unfortunately, you’re the only one around to process it with. Considering you forced me to cut off my best friend.”

“Meaning I’m your best friend now?” I ask. “That’s a scary thought. For both of us.”

“Can you not be an asshole for the next half an hour?” she snaps. “Because that would be really helpful.”

I tuck the knife back under my pillow and lie back.

“Continue,” I say. “I’ll keep the assholeishness to a minimum.”

“That’ll be the day,” she grumbles. “So what’s the plan exactly, Daniil? We’re just going to move from place to place under cover of night in the hopes that Gregor gets tired and stops searching for us?”

“No. We’re waiting for the moment when he’s no longer a threat.”

She stops short and frowns. “How do you plan on... neutralizing him?”

I smile. “Neutralizing him?” I repeat. “Someone’s been watching too many 80s action movies.”

“Daniil. What did we just discuss?”

I sigh again. She makes me do that a lot. “Once he can’t use you or Isla as leverage, we’ll be on an even playing field. Then I can take him out without a problem.”

She frowns, and the bizarre thought that races across my mind at the sight of that is, *I’m going to make it so you never frown again, sladkaya*. But I don’t say that out loud. It would break far too many of the rules I’ve put in place for myself.

“How are you going to fight a war while you’re on the run with Isla and me?” she ponders.

“Once I get you and Isla out of the country and settled somewhere safe, I’ll come finish things here.”

She jerks back like I hit her. “Wait. You mean, you’re planning on leaving us?”

“I’m not—”

She leaps off the bed and stands over me, her green eyes blazing with fury. “I see it now. Jesus, I don’t know how I didn’t see it before. You’re going to abandon us the moment we’re on foreign soil. Typical. Stash your family out of sight like we’re toys you don’t want to play with anymore. So fucking *typical*. God, you’re a walking cliché!”

“I have to deal with shit here. I’m the fucking don.”

“No, you’re Isla’s fucking father!” she corrects, her voice rising like a boiling kettle. “You’re supposed to be there to protect us.”

“That’s exactly what I’m trying to do.”

“Really?” she demands. “Because it sounds like you’re trying to disappear on me again.”

I wince. My head aches, my teeth ache, my bones ache. She’s not being crazy and she’s not being unfair. But it’s just too damn much right now. I need to solve one problem at a time, but here she is, throwing them all in my face at once.

She's not done yet, either.

"You're the reason we left our home and our lives in the middle of the night! You're the reason we're here, in the middle of nowhere, with no inkling of where we'll be the next day, much less the next week! And now, you're telling me that you're not even going to be around for any of it? Because you plan on what, exactly? Dumping us somewhere foreign and unfamiliar, and then bailing? *'See ya, figure it out on your own! I'll be back never!'*"

"Descending into hysterics isn't going to pull at my heartstrings."

"Of course not," Kinsley scoffs. "That would require you to actually have a heart."

I grab her flailing hands and force her back down on the bed, right on top of me. She yells out and starts squirming instantly, which is an unfortunate distraction, considering that there's nothing between my body and hers but a thin covering sheet.

"Let me up!"

"No. Not until you calm down and listen."

"You'll just feed me more bullshit."

"Probably, but you're going to listen anyway."

It's not the most convincing reply, so I shouldn't be surprised when she doesn't obey. But whether or not she likes my explanations is immaterial—they're true, so she needs to listen to them, goddammit.

I twist myself around, pinning her underneath me. Her hair fans out against the white sheets and her eyes look impossibly green against the muted light breaking in through the curtains. I'm too hard now to have this damn conversation, but some things can't be avoided.

"My life was never this difficult before you came into it."

Her eyes narrow. "Yeah? Well, right back atcha, buddy."

"Just listen to me, Kinsley. I'm trying to make you understand. Bratva wars are fought in the shadows. And sometimes, they

take time. Taking down a man with the kind of reach that Gregor has doesn't happen overnight. No matter how strong my own Bratva is. So what I need you to do is just be *patient*, for once in your damn life. Sit. Wait. Let me take care of this so I can take care of you. You won't want for anything while I'm gone."

"Am I supposed to be grateful for your benevolence, O Wise One?" she seethes, her voice catching.

"Another woman might be."

"Then find yourself one of those."

"No. None of them are you."

Those words seem to calm her down a little. She stops struggling as much, and her eyes focus on my face with something other than pure, biting anger. I'm so tempted to silence that arguing tongue of hers with my own.

"I... don't like this," she says at last in a soft voice.

"I'm not asking you to like it. But this is what we have to do to make sure that Gregor can't use you or Isla ever again."

More silence follows. It's tense and churning, in a strange sort of way. Like multiple emotions are fighting for dominance and there's no telling which one will win. I sense so much in her—fear, hope, curiosity, and beneath it all, that self-destructive attraction to danger that brought her into my world in the first place.

"Are you worried for me, Kinsley Whitlow?"

There's no mistaking the blush that creeps up her cheeks. She's too close to be able to get away with hiding it from me.

"I'm worried for Isla," she demurs. "I don't want her to have to lose her father just when she's found him."

"What a reasonable explanation," I muse. "So why don't I believe you?"

"Probably because you have a very big ego." She thrashes until she frees herself from my weight, but when she rolls

over, she takes the sheet with her. A beam of moonlight lands directly on my dick. As do Kinsley's eyes.

The blush on her cheeks gets even redder, which I didn't know was possible. "Oh my God," she gasps, a little unnecessarily. "You're naked."

"It would certainly seem that way."

"Jesus, cover yourself up."

"You're acting as though you've never seen a cock before. You're acting as though you've never seen *my* cock before."

"That was different. That was a lapse in judgment."

"Which time?"

"All of them," she snaps. "And it's not gonna happen again."

"I'll believe that when I see it, princess."

She breathes heavily, trying a little too hard to make her glare come off as convincingly irate. "Just so you know, I'm not telling Isla," she asserts. "You want to leave, then you're the one who's going to have to tell her."

I incline my head. "Fair enough."

"You think I'm hysterical? Wait 'til you face a nine-year-old who's waited her entire life for her father."

"My first duty is to make sure she's safe," I say grimly. "I'm okay with having her be angry with me if I can ensure her safety."

Kinsley pouts, but she knows I'm right. She huffs and crosses her arms over her chest.

"Go get some sleep," I tell her gently. "You'll need it. We move again in the morning."

She strays toward the door for a moment, but then she pauses, swallows, and stays in place. "It's a horrible feeling to believe that your parents are leaving you," she says softly. "That they're not coming back. My parents may not have walked out on me, not exactly. But they abandoned me in different ways. All I'm asking is that you don't make Isla feel that way."

I understand that better than she will ever know. I get off the bed and walk over to her. She stiffens instantly, trying determinedly to keep her eyes on mine.

“Don’t worry,” I say, lifting my hand up to her face. I brush the back of my fingers against her velvet cheek. “You won’t be able to get rid of me that easily.”

“This is not about me,” she says. “I just don’t want my daughter to have to mourn a father before she ever got a chance to know him. So, for Isla’s sake... don’t die, okay?”

Her face tightens as she speaks. The wars we’re fighting—wars of Bratvas, wars of emotions, wars between our past selves and what might become of us in the future—all of them are a long way from ending. It’s hard to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

But I see it. I know exactly what that light looks like.

A pair of green eyes, shining up from the depths.

“Trust me, *sladkaya*: I’m hard to kill.”

KINSLEY

“Mom?”

I twist around on bed and prop myself up on one elbow. The sun peeking through the blinds says it's morning. I tossed and turned for what seemed like ages after I got back from Daniil's room. As tired as I am, sleep was hard to come by.

“Hiya, kiddo,” I say, trying to sound as chipper as possible. “How're you doing?”

“I feel like I've been sleeping forever.” Isla sits up. Her hair is a knotted mess, and her eyes are big and puffy. There are creases on her face from the pillowcase. She blinks a couple of times and rubs her eyes with her fists, the way she used to as a little girl. That simple little motion makes my heart twinge painfully for years that we'll never get back.

“Where are we?” she asks, looking around the bedroom.

“Daniil and I thought we'd go on a little adventure together,” I explain, still wondering how to break it to her that he won't be with us for all of it.

“Because of Gregor?”

The way his name falls off her tongue takes me off guard. It's so casual, so undaunted. My little girl shouldn't be so brazen in the face of true evil like that. “Well, yes.”

“So we're running from him?” Isla asks.

I stroke her mussed hair away from her forehead. “You don't have to be scared, honey. I know you went through a lot last

night.”

“It wasn’t so bad. I knew that Papa would come to get me.”

“You did?”

“Well, not right from the beginning. I was a little scared when I first got taken. But afterwards, it was okay. Gregor has really nice food at this house.”

Her nonchalance is throwing me for a loop. Where are the tears? The fear? The uncertainty? She’s nine, for crying out loud. But she’s already braver than I am.

“It’s okay, Mom,” she says, putting her hand on mine. *She* is comforting *me*. Wonders never cease. “Really, I’m okay. And you wanna know why?”

“Why?”

“Because I’m a spy, like Daniil. He’s James Bond and I’m Miss Bond.”

I cringe again. How has Daniil managed to inspire this confidence after what seems like two seconds, when I’ve been failing at it for nine years?

“That’s... great,” I say, forcing a smile onto my face.

She gets up and pads over to the window to gaze out onto the miles of empty forest. “I wish I could tell Molly about all this.”

“I’m sorry we had to leave just when you made a new friend.”

Isla turns from the window. “It’s okay. Sometimes, spies have to do difficult things.”

You’re not a spy, I want to say. You’re nine. You’re my little girl. This isn’t real life.

But I bite down all of that. I’m resenting my own daughter for embracing everything that’s happened to us. What’s wrong with me?

“I packed your toothbrush and some fresh clothes in the black duffel by the bathroom door,” I tell her, hoping to busy myself

with the mundane parts of mothering. “Go rinse off. There’s a bathtub in there big enough to wash an elephant in.”

Grinning, Isla scampers over to the bathroom. “Whoa!” she exclaims when she sees it. “It’s huge!”

I follow her and peer over her shoulder. The ancient porcelain tub has huge lion’s feet gripping the tile floor and a gilded rim. It’s regal, if that’s something a bathtub can be. She’s always been a bathtub kid, ever since she was small enough for me to bathe her in the sink when I first brought her home from the hospital. But we’d never lived anywhere big enough to have much of one. Even still, she loved filling it up with bubbles and splashing around until they were all gone. That’s one piece of the past she hasn’t outgrown yet.

“I’m gonna be downstairs, okay?”

“Okay!” she calls over the sound of running water.

I walk downstairs trying to figure out why my nerves feel so weirdly sensitive. Every creak in the steps makes me jump; every chilly draft makes me shiver.

Something pricks at my nose as I reach the ground floor. When I walk into the kitchen, I find out what it is: none other than Daniil, standing behind the stove, a dish towel thrown across his right shoulder, wielding a frying pan in one hand and a spatula in the other.

“Um, what are you doing?” I ask in bewilderment.

He frowns, offering me only a cursory glance. “Is that a trick question?”

“You’re... cooking.”

“And you’re stating the obvious.”

I pull my jaw back up in place and walk over to see what he’s concocting. “I just... I didn’t peg you as the cooking type.”

I’m honestly flabbergasted, which is why I’m stammering like an idiot. Hell freezing over, pigs flying, bears walking on their hind legs—all things I expected to see sooner than I expected to see Daniil Vlasov getting handy with a spatula.

“Hm. I didn’t peg you as the sexist type.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m not surprised because you’re a man. I’m surprised because you’re, well... you.”

“Are you always this articulate in the mornings?”

I ignore him and breathe in through my nostrils. “It smells good. What are you cooking?”

“I’ve got some *kasha* with beef, and some *syrniki* on the go.”

“You just said a bunch of words I don’t know.”

He smiles. “Kasha,” he says, moving to the second stove to twist the ladle around the pot, “is a traditional Russian porridge. And *syrniki* are pancakes, more or less. But they’re made with cottage cheese.”

“Sounds good. Smells good, too.”

I’m not lying—my mouth is already watering. Luckily, I don’t have to wait long, because Daniil ladles two massive portions of the porridge into a deep bowl and then adds beef on top.

“Eat.”

The beef looks like a ragout. It’s falling apart against the spoon and its juices are running into the creaminess of the porridge. Steam rises from the bowl, but I ignore it and dive in anyway.

It’s savory and salty, deliciously umami, with so much texture and flavor that I can’t help but moan around the piping hot mouthful of food. “Wow,” I breathe. “Where did you learn to make that?”

“My mother.”

“She liked to cook?”

“She avoided it whenever possible. But when she did, this was what she made. It was her favorite thing to eat in the mornings. Or really any time she felt low. Which was... well, often.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“Some people are destined to live unhappy lives.”

He doesn't have to tell me twice. Look at my own mother, my father. They'd both lived unhappy lives, each one's made worse by the other. I could argue that my father deserved to. But my mother? What was her crime?

Staying. That's it. So simple and so unforgivable.

"Try the syrniki," Daniil suggests, drawing me from my thoughts. "It's a choose-your-own-adventure kind of deal. Sweet or savory. I've got sour cream, but there's also honey and fresh berries."

"You've got a fully-stocked fridge."

"Both articulate *and* observant. What a combination."

I roll my eyes. "Did you go to the grocery store or something while Isla and I were sleeping?"

"Of course not," he says imperiously, like the task is beneath him. To be fair, I can't say I can picture him walking around a grocery store, elbowing grandmas out of the way while he hunts for the ripest avocados or whatever.

"Then..."

"Rat."

"Right. Rat. Goodness, what a charmer. His parents must have grieved for the good Christian name they gave him."

Daniil chuckles. "Hardly. His father was the one who gave him the nickname. Apparently, Rat was the rodent he could never get rid of."

I shudder. "Jeez, that's harsh."

"Harsh is the only word that you could use to describe Rat's father. He worked for me for a while."

"Worked? Like, past tense?"

"He died a few years ago. Took a shot to the head. Rat was standing right behind him. His face was splattered with his father's blood for hours before he finally agreed to wash it off."

The story makes my stomach churn. “I suppose it’s a better way to lose your parent than some of the alternatives.”

It’s only when Daniil’s eyes snap to mine that I realize I’ve said something completely insensitive. Not that there’s judgment in Daniil’s expression. There is curiosity aplenty, though.

“That came out really wrong,” I say quickly. “That’s not what I meant. I wasn’t thinking.”

“What did you mean then?”

I frown. “I guess I just meant... It’s easier to lose a parent that way than to watch them choose to leave you. He may have dubbed his son Rat, but at least he stuck around.”

“Your father stuck around.”

“But he checked out in every other way. He wasn’t really a father, he was more of a—”

“Sperm donor?”

I nod. “Exactly. And Mom... She chose to die. She thought about it. She made a decision, knowing she wasn’t just leaving me behind; she was leaving me with *him*. Even when she was alive, she was always leaving. I guess she justified it in her head. It’s not like he hit me.”

“There are plenty of other ways to hurt the ones we love.”

I gaze down at the steam rising in spirals off of the food in my bowl. “She’d go off for hours on end. ‘*I get to be someone else for a little while, baby,*’ she’d tell me. ‘*When I’m out of this house, I get to be myself.*’” I shake my head. “It always made me wonder: which version of her did I get? Who was she when she was with me?”

I lift my face up and catch Daniil’s gaze. Confusingly, he’s frowning.

“What? What are you looking at me like that for?”

“That explains why you are the way you are with Isla.”

That sets my hackles rising instantly. “Well, I sure as hell wasn’t going to repeat my mom’s mistakes. I’m all she has, so

I had to make sure she always knows she is loved. That I *want* to be her mother.”

He nods. “You can do that by just being around. No need to shove yourself down her throat all the time.”

I glare at him, my heart pitter-patting with some mix of anger and that sinking feeling when someone tells you something real that you don’t want to hear. “I’m sorry, but you showed up in her life approximately five minutes ago. What qualifies you to tell me how to parent?”

He shrugs. “You’re not the only one with bad parents, Kinsley. The rest of us have had them, too. You. Me. Rat.”

I glance at the pancakes on the griddle and pluck a fat one off the top of the stack he’s formed. “At least your mother made you pancakes,” I point out, shaking it in his face like a cudgel.

His eyes are flat and sad. “She made them for herself. Not for me.”

I feel a stirring in my chest. A sadness for the little boy Daniil was. It makes me wonder, if his mom had made those pancakes for him, would he be different now? Less cold? Less combative? More caring?

Can one thing form a person? Or is it just an endless series of harsh moments that whittle away at us, until we are who we are and there’s no changing it from there?

“I’m sorry, Daniil.”

His face twists into an irritated glower. “Why? They may not have been meant for me, but I took what I wanted. I was never interested in playing the victim.”

“You think I play the victim?”

“I don’t know, Miss Runaway Bride,” he says coldly, calling forth the image of myself in a big white wedding dress and mascara-tainted tears imprinted on my face. “Do you?”

My heart flutters painfully. Two seconds ago, we both had our hands on a tender moment of vulnerability. Just like that, it’s gone though. Vanished like it never existed.

I fumble to get it back anyway. “It’s okay to be hurt, Daniil. She was your mother.”

He shakes his head. “She was a victim, and now, she’s dead. That’s how those things go.” His words slice right through me, sharp and unrelenting.

I drop the pancake back down onto the plate and stand up. Suddenly, I’m not hungry anymore.

“I’m going to go check on Isla,” I announce.

He doesn’t stop me.

KINSLEY

An hour later, it's time to go.

Again.

Daniil hasn't said a word to me since our spat in the kitchen. He loaded some bags into the rear of a truck that mysteriously appeared in the driveway, told Isla to get in the car, and then climbed up into the driver's seat without bothering to so much as breathe in my direction.

I considered staying. Snatching my daughter out of the truck and making a life for ourselves in these woods until the danger has passed.

How can I follow this infuriating, mysterious man who refuses to admit that his scars hurt him, too? How can I follow him blindly into God-knows-what's-to-come?

The easy answer is ugly: it's because I have no choice.

The honest answer is a hell of a lot more complex.

At the end of the day, one thing is clear: I'm in over my head. This world of his is not anything I've ever prepared to deal with.

So I do the only thing I can do, and get in the car.

We drive for a while in silence. Isla stares out the window in one of her brooding moods. We stop by Walmart to buy changes of clothes, then do another few hours of empty highway cruising.

"I'm hungry," Isla announces sometime in the afternoon.

“Then let’s eat,” Daniil replies. He takes the next exit and steers us to the closest restaurant.

There’s an old man sitting at the window seat of the diner when we pull into its gravel parking lot. He eyes us curiously as we get out of the truck.

I wonder what he’s most curious about. The burly six-footer wearing baggy Walmart jeans and a plaid XXL shirt that’s somehow still tight enough to squeeze the blood from his biceps? Or the nine-year-old girl, wearing a princess dress over her jeans and heart-shaped sunglasses way too big for her face?

“I can’t believe you let her buy those,” I tell Daniil as we walk towards the entrance. “You can’t just get her everything she asks for. It sets a bad precedent.”

“The girl’s a spy. She wanted spy glasses. So she gets spy glasses.”

I suppress a smile. “Where are your spy glasses then, eh, big shot?”

“I’m in the market for a new pair. If you see anything heart-shaped, let me know.”

It feels dangerously close to a joke, which wouldn’t jive at all with the broody douche thing he’s been doing all morning ever since we almost-kinda-sorta had a moment of vulnerability in the cabin kitchen. But I keep that smile tamped down.

He slaps his palm against the push door. As it swings forward on its hinges, a little bell rings overhead. The waitress walks around the counter to welcome us in.

“Welcome to Angie’s Hideaway. Can I get you a table or a booth?”

“Booth,” I say, at the same time Daniil orders, “Table.”

The waitress looks politely between the two of us before turning her attention to Isla. “Guess you’re the tiebreaker, sweetheart.”

“Table,” Isla says without missing a beat.

Little traitor, I think to myself with a sardonic laugh. Sighing, I follow Daniil and Isla to a table in the corner of the quiet little diner.

Once upon a time, this place might've been charming. A little while after that, it might've been refreshingly old-school. Now, it's just straight-up depressing. The jukebox is cracked and cobwebby, the grooves between floor tiles hold dirt older than I am, and the air has a musty smell that just makes me inexplicably sad.

"Menus are right there on the table. Once you're ready to order, just ring-a-ding-ding on your table bell and I'll be over in a jiff," the waitress says, flashing a bright smile. She's the only thing in this place that has much life left.

"Table bell," Daniil mutters. "Jesus."

"We're not in Kansas anymore."

"Kansas would be preferable." He glances at me. "So would hell."

I grab a menu so that I don't have to keep looking at his chiseled features against the pulled collar of his checkered shirt. It shouldn't suit him, looking so devastating in an outfit that cost ten bucks plus tax. And yet it suits him. It suits him a hell of a lot.

"Do they have pasta here?" Isla pipes up.

"Don't think they do, honey," I say. "How about some good ol' mac 'n' cheese?"

Isla shrugs in agreement and sets her menu down. I stare at mine for a long time, but I'm not really reading. The words blur into a squiggly mess and I just keep staring like it'll resolve into a picture of my future if I'm patient enough. No such luck, though.

"Do you know what you want to order?" Daniil asks, startling me from my reverie.

I look up at him and blink the haze away from my eyes. "I'm not really all that hungry."

"Eat something."

My eyes narrow. “I said I’m not hungry.”

He narrows his eyes right back at me, but for a change, he doesn’t press the point. The waitress approaches the table once Isla hits the bell with a delightful giggle. Daniil gives her our order. A double burger, mac ‘n’ cheese, and two Cokes.

“What about you, ma’am?” the waitress asks, turning to look at me.

“Just a coffee, please.”

She offers a heavily accented, “Sure thing, darlin’,” and struts back over to the counter.

I watch her go. Her uniform is a specific shade of bubblegum pink that makes my heart race. I haven’t seen that color in a long time. I thought I’d forgotten it. Or purged it from my memory, really.

But my eyes remember.

My bones remember.

My heart remembers.

Daniil clears his throat. “We need to pick names.”

My forehead wrinkles. “Pick names? For what?”

Isla throws me an exasperated expression and glances at Daniil almost apologetically, as if to say, *Sorry about my mom; she’s a little slow*. Just like when we first walked in, she flocks to him so instinctively that it makes my head spin. I became the third wheel when I wasn’t even paying attention.

“Papa explained all this in the car! We’re on the run, remember?” she explains impatiently. “We need aliens.”

“Aliases,” Daniil corrects.

“That’s what I said.”

The waitress bustles back out of the kitchen, the door swinging behind her with that familiar, creaky murmur. I watch her tend to some task behind the counter and I can’t help but think how I’ve *seen* all this before.

I've never been in this place in my life, but I *know* that uniform, I *know* those place settings, I *know* that smear of dust where the plates get stacked. Without getting anywhere near her, I know how she smells—like faded perfume and stale sweat and coffee. The smell of broken dreams.

Or at the very least, I knew someone a lot like her.

“What do you want your name to be?”

I drag my eyes away from the uniform. The pink is hurting my eyes for reasons I can't or won't explain.

“Huh?”

“Your name, Mom! C'mon!” Isla says. Her feet thump against the legs of the table as she swings them. “Your alien name!”

“Alice,” I answer automatically, unthinkingly. I regret it as soon as it comes out of my mouth.

“Alice?” Isla repeats. “As in Alice in Wonderland?”

“As in Alice Whitlow,” I offer quietly. My face is burning with a strange kind of shame.

Isla is still confused. But Daniil gets it.

“Your mother,” he says softly, so our daughter can't hear it.

I'm busy doing a full-body, soul-deep cringe. The stupid pink uniforms are throwing me for a loop, that's all. The more I look at them now, though, the less like my mother's old waitressing uniform they look. My eyes are playing tricks on me. These ones are really more orange than pink.

Isla shrugs and carries on. “Okay, so Mom's Alice and I'm—”

“No,” I blurt. “I changed my mind. I don't want to be Alice.”

Daniil arches an eyebrow. Isla pauses, no doubt baffled by why I'm acting so weird. Then she shrugs once again and goes right back to the game at hand.

“Well, I want to be named Rose,” Isla announces.

I'm hoping she's going to pull the focus off me, but even when Daniil turns his gaze on Isla, it feels like the rest of him is still somehow pointing my way.

“What about you, Papa?” Isla asks, blissfully unaware of the tornado of emotions ripping through me. “What name do you pick for yourself?”

He scratches his chin thoughtfully. “Jude,” he says at last.

“That’s a weird name. Why?”

He shrugs. “Let’s pretend I’m a fan of The Beatles.”

“Hey! So is Mom,” Isla says, looking between us, clearly expecting us to be as thrilled by the similarity as she seems to be. “Right, Mom?”

“We’ve got a few Beatles tunes on the old juke over there,” the waitress says as she appears tableside bearing a tray in her hand. “If you want, you can go over and pick yourself a song.”

“Can I?” Isla asks, though she’s addressing Daniil, not me.

He pulls out his wallet and forks through the contents. I wonder if I should point out that the kind of regular guys who wear plaid shirts and Walmart jeans don’t usually have wallets stuffed fat with hundred-dollar bills, but I think better of it and say nothing instead.

“I don’t usually carry change,” he says with a frown.

I roll my eyes, reach into my pocket, and pull out a handful of quarters. “Here,” I say, offering the coins to Isla. “That should buy you a few songs.”

“Thanks, Mom.” She slides off the chair and skips over to the jukebox.

Meanwhile, the waitress unloads the contents of her tray on the table. “Can I get you folks anything else?” she asks when she’s done.

“No, thank you,” I say, wrapping my hands around the mug of coffee, hoping the caffeine will help calm my sudden restlessness.

“Well, ring if ya need anything,” the waitress says. *It’s orange, not pink, I tell myself. It looks nothing like Mama’s. Nothing at all.*

“Your mother was a waitress.”

I jerk towards Daniil so fast that I almost spill hot coffee on my fingers. “How—What—How did you know?”

“I figure there had to be a reason you seem so preoccupied with the waitresses’ uniforms. And it’s definitely not because they’re attractive.”

I sip my coffee. It’s not nearly as hot or as strong as I need it to be to burn these thoughts away.

“She used to work in this little café in town,” I admit. “A lot like this one. She’d let me sit at the counter and do my homework after school while she finished her shift. That was nice for a few months.”

“She quit?”

“No. She made me stop coming.”

He doesn’t ask me for more information. Which is probably a sign that I should stop talking. But as the first notes of “*Hey Jude*” fill the diner, I realize just how much I’ve never been a fan of an unfinished story.

“Her excuse was that she got tipped less when people—mostly men—saw that I was her kid. But I think it was about separating parts of her life from one another. Compartmentalizing. I used to pass the diner on the way home from school and I’d always spend a few minutes watching her from the windows. She was so much more animated when she was alone. She smiled easier, laughed louder. Like a totally different person.”

His eyes are burning a hole in mine. I keep my gaze riveted on my coffee. “Then what?”

“She got fired. A couple hundred bucks went missing from the register one day and Mama took the blame. She wore her pink uniform home in tears, packed it away in the back of her closet, and never looked at it again.”

Daniil doesn’t ask the question, and I’m grateful enough to volunteer the answer anyway. “She did do it, though. Take the money, I mean. Apparently, she and Dad were short on the rent. He forced her to skim the till. They had a huge fight about it the day after Mom was fired.”

I glance back over my shoulder. Isla is still standing by the jukebox, flipping a coin in her hand and thumbing through the selection.

“Did he hit her?”

I snort. “He always hit her.”

“Did she ever hit back?”

I take another sip of my coffee. It seems to taste successively worse each time. “Not that night. He grabbed her by her ponytail and slammed her into the wall. I watched from the staircase and cried the whole time. I should have tried to stop him. I wasn’t brave enough to stop him.”

“You shouldn’t have needed to be,” he says softly.

It’s a miracle how those words do what the coffee has failed to do—quiet the screaming in my head.

“What’s with the name?” I ask, feeling suddenly constricted by emotions clogging up my throat.

“What name?”

“Jude. You came up with that one pretty fast.”

“I already told you why.”

“Yeah, you’re a fan of The Beatles. Meanwhile, I’ve got a bridge in Brooklyn to sell you. You knew a Jude, didn’t you?”

He shakes his head. “Not quite. I almost did.”

I grimace and drink more of my coffee. “If the conversation is devolving into riddles, I’d rather sit here in silence.”

“Be my guest.”

My eyes narrow. Daniil looks placid as he cuts his burger down the middle with neat efficiency. “Is it that hard for you to talk about yourself?” I ask, unable to help myself.

“I’d rather not.”

“If I have to give up my name for you, the least you can do is give up some information to me.”

“Aliases are necessary. You knowing my life story is not.”

I shrug. “Then I’ll just keep asking questions until I get answers.”

He sighs, sets his knife down, folds his hands together, and looks at me. “My mother got pregnant again. If the baby had been born, he’d have been named Jude. He didn’t, so he wasn’t. End of story.”

He says it all without an ounce of emotion. Way back when, I might’ve believed that he truly felt none. I think I know better now, though. There are cracks in his walls, and they’re growing, and when I look close, I can see through them to what’s left of the beating heart he protects so fiercely.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. The song is hitting its crescendo, loud and proud. Isla is wiggling happily in the corner.

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault.”

It’s instant, his defensiveness. The way he pushes back every time we let the conversation flow into vulnerable territory. But I’m onto him now. And I’ve got the lion’s share of patience between the two of us.

You can’t teach first graders without patience. You can’t wait ten years for your daughter’s father to reappear without patience.

I’ve got enough patience to outlast even Daniil Vlasov.

“I can still be sorry. For you and especially for your poor mother.”

And I am. I don’t know head or tail about this woman, but I feel for her.

“It was a good thing she miscarried,” he says harshly. “She was in no fit state to have another child. She could barely deal with me. And that’s with boarding school and an army of au pairs to lighten the load.”

I recoil. “That’s a horrible thing to say.”

He raises one thick, confident eyebrow. He’s doing this deliberately. Sharing, yes—but keeping me at arm’s length while he does it. Just so that I don’t get any funny ideas about the nature of our relationship. So that I understand that even

the tragedies in his life were approached with clinical precision and detached acceptance. Never a trace of feeling.

In Daniil's world, there's no such thing as feeling.

"Some people don't deserve to get what they want."

"She must have been heartbroken."

"I think she was more relieved."

"But you weren't."

Daniil frowns. "What makes you say that?"

"Because decades later, when it came time to pick an alias for yourself, you picked the name of your lost brother," I remind him. "Your mother may not have mourned him. But you did."

His burger is raised halfway to his mouth. At my words, he drops it in disgust and looks at me. His eyes are filmy with anger, but like the rest of his bluster, I see past it now. I see what's real.

"She was a shit mother and everything that happened to her was earned."

"That's the saddest thing I've ever heard," I whisper. "I also think it's bullshit. She hurt you, Daniil. It's okay to say that."

"She did no such fucking thing."

If there were other people in this diner, they'd be staring. But the waitress is helping out in the kitchen and Isla is absorbed in the blasting music. It's just us here, in a little bubble away from the rest of the world.

"She was a shit mother, but so are lots of people. Ninety-nine percent of the mothers in the world are, give or take a percent."

I sigh. "So you're a glass-half-empty kind of guy, huh?"

"No. I'm a break-the-glass kind of guy."

He doesn't have to tell me that. There are moments when I feel as though he's on the verge of breaking *me*. He's already destroyed the life I struggled to build for Isla and me. He's

destroyed my sense of calm, my hope that the world wasn't such a horrible place after all.

I might have hated him for it—if I didn't truly believe that he was trying to save us in the process.

"We're parents," I remind him, glancing over at Isla. She's picked another song. "SOS" by ABBA. Apparently, the jukebox only caters to old classics with eerily fitting themes. "Which percentage do we fall into?"

"You tell me."

"I'm doing my best," I answer quietly. "I think that makes me better than my parents were."

Daniil ponders that as he takes a bite of his food. "Why'd you choose her name? Your mother's."

"I saw the uniforms and it triggered a memory. Her name came out. That's not my alias, though. I'm not Alice. I'm not her."

"So you keep saying."

Isla walks back to the table as the ABBA song hits its last note. "I ran out of coins," she informs us, slipping into the empty chair beside Daniil.

Her food has cooled down now, but she shovels a spoonful into her mouth anyway. Daniil's eyes catch mine, and I feel my breath hike. I push my cup of coffee away and lean back against the uncomfortable chair.

How am I going to survive days on end with this man? I can't exactly avoid him when we're trapped in the same vehicle for indefinite periods of time.

The fact that I don't really want to is all the more reason to chase distance and space. I can't rely on a man who's proven time and time again that he'll leave me when I need him most.

"Happy with your alias, Isla?" Daniil asks.

"Rose," Isla confirms with a firm nod. "And you're Jude."

Daniil turns to me. "That leaves...?"

I look between the two of them. They're wearing almost identical expressions right now, and it's making me realize just how similar they are in looks. I've spent nine years with Isla, and I'm still no closer to understanding her. Not in the way that Daniil apparently seems to have done in an instant.

I suppose that puts me amongst the ninety-nine percent. Right alongside my own dearly beloved parents.

"You're Alice, right, Mom?" Isla presses.

It's so hard to deny. She made bad decisions, just like me. With men, just like me. In motherhood, just like me.

I didn't understand her back then, and that lack of understanding made me feel like I was immune from sharing her fate. I didn't have to fear becoming her, because how could you become something you didn't understand?

Now, though...

"Mom?"

I blink and draw my attention to Isla with difficulty. "Sorry?"

"Your alias," she repeats. "You're Alice, aren't you?"

"Yeah," I rasp. "Yeah, I guess I am."

DANIIL

Thanks to Kinsley's nonsense, I've got a head chock full of long-repressed memories and a name burning on my tongue that I should never have uttered in the first place.

Now, I'm stuck with it. *Jude.*

"We've been driving for a long time," Kinsley says, breaking the silence that's held fast since Isla fell asleep. "I thought you said we were close?"

"We're an hour closer than we were an hour ago."

She throws me an irritated glare. I reach towards the back of the truck with one hand and pull out the brown paper bag I'd requested back at the diner.

"Here," I say, shoving it into her hands.

She stares down at the paper bag for a moment as though she's worried snakes will pop out of it. The paper rustles as she pulls it open.

"It's a tuna melt," she says, puzzled.

"There should be potato wedges in there, too."

"You got me food?"

"You should have eaten at the diner," I tell her. "But since you decided to be stubborn, I took matters into my own hands and bought you what is almost certainly going to be a subpar, lukewarm tuna melt. Bon appetit."

She pulls it out, eyes it once more from all sides just to make sure it's not a trick, and then takes a bite so big that there can be no denying her hunger. I resist the urge to smile as tuna and cheese smear against the edges of her lips. She even moans quietly.

I stiffen a little at the sound. "Isla's sleeping," I scold, if only to distract from what that little moan does to me.

"I'm being quiet," she retorts with a mouth full of cheese. She hasn't even swallowed before she takes another bite. "Is there something to drink?"

"In the compartment in front of you."

She keeps eating, chomping at the sandwich like a ravenous pitbull. She doesn't even try to be ladylike. It's surprisingly sexy.

When she's done inhaling the sandwich, she gives the Mountain Dew the same treatment. "Mmm," she says when it's all gone, smacking her lips appreciatively.

"Stop doing that."

"Doing what?"

"Making that sound."

She frowns as if she doesn't know what the hell I'm talking about. "Are you hangry, too? Should I have saved you a bite so Dani Boy's blood sugar doesn't get too low and he gets cwanky?" She says it just like that, with a well-rehearsed baby voice. *Cwanky*.

"No, I'm not hungry," I snap.

"Just cwanky then. What else is new?"

She dusts off her lap and discards the empty brown paper bag at her feet. Somewhere between one interstate and the next, she'd peeled off her sweatshirt. Now, she's in a tight white tank top bedazzled with sandwich crumbs. Her hair is tied up in a sloppy bun, and she has one foot tucked casually beneath her.

She's never looked better.

“Have you spoken to Petro? I want to make sure that Emma is okay.”

“Emma is fine.”

“How do you know, though?” she demands.

“My men are on the job. I trained them. She’s fine.”

She sighs and glances back at Isla. Her expression is at once tender and bewildered. Like she’s trying to figure out a ten-thousand piece puzzle but doesn’t even know where to begin.

“You don’t speak much about your father,” she says, turning her attention back to me like I’m the easier of the two puzzles to crack.

I glance at her. “If I’d known feeding you was going to open the floodgates, I’d have kept you on a starvation diet.”

“But you didn’t,” she says. “Because you’re not the cold beast you pretend to be.”

“Nobody’s pretending.”

“Well, nobody can be cold and detached all the time.”

“Watch me.”

She scoffs. “I’m sure the whole tough guy thing worked for you in the past. In jail, especially. But I see through you, Daniil. You’re a big softie on the inside. I see it every time you look at Isla.”

I grunt irritably. I should’ve bought her a muzzle instead of a sandwich.

Her eyes zip back to the black road ahead of us. My headlights brighten only the first few feet of concrete. The night swallows everything else.

“What were you like as a child?”

“Jesus.”

“It’s a long drive, Daniil. Humor me.”

I rest my head back against the seat. “I was bad-tempered and impatient. Not much has changed.”

Kinsley snorts. “Well, given that you lived in boarding schools and were raised by au pairs, I suppose being bad-tempered and impatient is understandable.”

I look over at her with a bad temper and impatience. She really thinks that all it takes is a little coaxing for me to start blabbing like I’m in therapy? That I’m so easily strung along?

“Boarding school had its benefits. Freedom was one. And even the au pairs weren’t so bad, after a while.”

“How many did you have?”

“Boarding schools or au pairs?”

She raises her eyebrows. “Both. Either. Whichever.”

“Three boarding schools. Eleven au pairs. Twelve, if you count the one who quit on her first day.”

“Goodness gracious,” she breathes. “Why so many?”

“Mom caught me fucking one too many of them.”

Her head twist towards me so fast it’s a miracle she doesn’t snap her neck. “W-what?”

I nod. “She was a beautiful woman. Blonde hair. Blue eyes. Perfect ass. It was the perfect initiation to sex.”

Her cheeks go red and her eyes flatten with anger. “You’re disgusting.”

“Why?” I say. “Because I knew what I wanted at thirteen? You’re the one who wanted to know more about me.”

“Not stuff like that!”

“You want me to cherry pick, is that it?” I ask. “You want to hear about the stories that involve carnivals and book fairs and trips to the shore, without all the goriness in between?”

“That’s not—”

“I’ve got news for you, princess: there were no carnivals or book fairs in my life. It’s been ugly at best and horrifying at worst. If you’re looking for happy endings, look elsewhere.”

She suddenly doesn’t look so angry anymore. More like crestfallen, actually. Heartbroken for a boy she never even

knew.

For a boy *I* hardly ever even knew.

“Is this what you do when someone gets too close?” she asks. “I ask questions about your parents and you deflect by telling me about all your disgusting teenage conquests? By trying to scare me off?”

“I take it you’re not interested in my conquests.”

“No,” she scowls. “Safe to say I’m not interested in hearing about the long litany of gullible women you’ve duped into sleeping with you.”

“That’s hardly giving yourself much credit.”

She bristles. “I was a naïve fool, and I’m not ashamed to admit it.”

“And what’s your excuse now?”

“Loneliness,” she says softly.

As excuses go, it’s a good one. Both vulnerable and blatantly honest. I feel a pinch of something in my gut. Something that’s uncomfortable enough to make me feel like this conversation isn’t quite over, even if that’s all I want to happen.

She sighs. “Don’t you ever get lonely?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Never? Not even when you were in prison?”

“It was the vacation I didn’t know I needed.”

She rolls her eyes. “You don’t mean that.”

When I peel my eyes off the road to glance over at her, I see her regarding me curiously, head tilted to the side as if to see me from a new angle. Her sincerity is obvious: for better or for worse, she really does want to try and figure me out. Probably because she believes, like most naïve women, that she can save me.

But I’m not savable.

And I can pinpoint the exact moment when I realized as much.

I was in solitary confinement after a particularly rough fight with some of the stupider inmates. They thought banding together would give them the upper hand. It didn't. But it did send three of them to the prison medical ward for the rest of their sentences, and it sent me into a tiny, concrete-walled cell in the solitary confinement halls for the rest of mine.

When the flap on my door creaked open one night and a box got shoved through the opening, I knew it could have come only from *him*. There's no other way an inmate in solitary would be allowed a delivery of any kind.

Especially one like this.

But seeing those blackened fingers and the bright diamond ring glinting back at me like a curse, I knew right then and there that I wasn't savable. That I didn't deserve to be saved.

That everything I cared about was already lost.

"You broke out of prison," Kinsley reminds me, dragging me back to reality. "Doesn't sound like much of a vacation if you were in such a hurry to leave."

I shrug. "I had stuff to do."

I make a turn and we come up on an amazing breadth of rock face. The moon turns the dark rock into a luminescent blue, highlighting the smooth edges and caramel ripples.

There's no sign by the road directing us to our destination, which was another reason I'd picked it. You have to know where you want to go. There's probably a moral buried in there somewhere, though hell will freeze over before I go looking for it.

I search, squinting through the darkness until I see it—a tiny, hand-carved road winding through the rock face. It's just wide enough to get the truck through. Kinsley grabs her armrests and looks at me with concern.

"Where are you taking us?"

"Somewhere we won't be found."

She bites her lip and stays quiet as we start the bumpy climb. Miraculously, Isla stays asleep the whole time.

“My ears are popping,” Kinsley mutters after a while.

“That means we’re close.”

When the road flattens out again, we see a row of faint lights marking out the edges. A few hundred yards after that, we round a curve and it comes into sight.

“Oh my goodness,” Kinsley breathes.

The cabin—though that’s an inadequate name for the place—is pure granite, carved right into the side of a cliff. It looks ancient and modern at the same time. Austere. Untouchable.

I park the truck in a small clump of trees cloaked in shadows so that not even passing planes could spot it. Then I scoop Isla out of the back and carry her towards the door. Kinsley, however, lingers by the truck. When I realize she’s not following, I turn and look at her.

“This place must cost a fortune,” she breathes nervously.

I laugh. “Thankfully, that’s exactly how much I have.”

With that, I sweep inside.

The interior of the place matches the outside in its rugged brutality. Sandstone floors, blood-red tapestries hanging from the walls, strange iron sculptures twisted into fantastic shapes. I find the first bedroom and settle Isla underneath the covers.

When I come out, I see the other bedroom door is closed, and the handle is locked when I try it. I sigh. I could break it down if I wanted, but if it’s privacy that Kinsley is after, so be it. She can have all the distance she wants.

Getting too close is what caused all this shit in the first place.

I strip down to my boxers and walk out onto the balcony. The cold air nips at my body like piranhas having a first taste, but it wakes me up. It steadies me. I needed that.

I fall into the hammock, which gives me a perfect view of the waterfall across the valley. Huge tufts of vapor clouds rise from the pool below. The trees at the upper lip are craggy and dense.

I need to sleep. I just need to close my eyes and sleep.

But I keep glancing towards the bedroom door, waiting for a sound, a sign that she might still be awake.

Enough. Stop this foolishness.

The girl may have given me a child, but that doesn't mean she's equipped for anything else. She's not ready to take on the mantle I would need her to wear if we were to go down that road together.

A don's wife needs to be more than just a pretty face. She needs to walk the line between obstinate and obedient, between reckless and resilient.

And Kinsley... The woman may have survived an abusive father, a neglectful mother, an even more abusive ex, an accidental pregnancy, and an asshole don—and yes, I do mean myself—but I'm not sure she's learned from any of those experiences. She's still woefully naïve, painfully immature, and entirely too soft to be able to handle this life.

So it's better that she stays in her room.

Better if we keep our distance.

But every few minutes, my eyes float to her door.

Wondering if we can bring the impossible to life.

KINSLEY

I'm exhausted.

It's the kind of exhaustion that whittles away at your bones and leaves your skin feeling dry and taut. My eyes are heavy, but the moment I close them, my mind spins from side to side, pulling up images I don't want to fall asleep to.

"Goddammit, Daniil," I snap, jerking upright.

The house-in-the-rock, as I've come to call it in my head, is quiet and still. Isla hasn't stirred once since Daniil tucked her in. Wherever he is, he isn't making noise, either.

I look down at my hands and turn them around, palms up, to run my finger over my wrists, searching for the thin white scar that's been with me since I was fifteen.

It's barely visible now, which is something I only truly started appreciating once Isla was born. I don't ever want her to know how fucked-up I am.

How close I came to doing what my mother did.

I toss the duvet aside and pad across the warm wooden floors towards the door. Banishing him from this room defeats the purpose if I go out there now. Common sense is harder at this altitude, though—right?

The little narc's voice in my head says I'm being a fool. I shush it and slip outside the room.

Thick glass doors divide the living room from the balcony. Outside, the hammock swings in the wind, weighted down by

the massive man tucked into its open weave.

He's bare of everything but a pair of navy blue boxers. It must be cold out there, but he doesn't seem to mind or notice. I stand there watching him far too long for it to be innocent.

It's only when he sighs and moves that I realize he's not sleeping. He's just deep in thought, staring off at the waterfall like it's whispering the answers to all his problems, but doing it just a little bit too quietly to be heard right.

The brooding bad boy with a heart of gold is a sucker trope for women who read romance novels, I know that. It never works out nearly as well in real life as it does in fiction.

But, God help me, I'm going in anyway.

I slide open the door and step out. "Couldn't sleep?" Daniil asks without bothering to look up.

I shake my head and pull the woolen blanket tighter around my shoulders. "Tried and failed."

"Drink some." He offers me a silver flask that I hadn't noticed before. I wrinkle my nose at the smell. Whiskey, I think.

"No thanks."

He shrugs and brings the flask to his lips. "Suit yourself. You'll freeze without it, though."

"You might freeze even with it. Do you want a blanket?"

He glances at me, one eyebrow raised. We have been sniping at each other a lot in the last few days. Like two magnets of the same pole repelling one another.

The relative feeling of calm had shattered the night Isla was taken and I hadn't stopped writhing around in my own fear. Instead, I'd turned all that fear in Daniil's direction and expected him to know what to do with it. It's hard to say which of us is the more broken one.

"I'm fine," he says eventually. "The cold is how you know you're alive."

I bite back a laugh. I'll be damned—he might be a poet after all. Shivering, I take a tentative seat on the nearby sofa. My

back is to the waterfall, but I'd rather look at him. Daniil shifts his gaze over and regards me, but he says nothing. Just waits for me to break the silence.

"I don't want to fight, okay?" I say, breaking the delicate veneer of tension rippling between us. "It's been a rough few days and I don't want to keep butting heads with you. One of us is bound to break and the odds aren't in my favor."

He smiles. "Once again, you're not giving yourself enough credit."

I laugh, but it's kind of bitter. He's just being nice in the interests of our fragile truce.

"This place is beautiful," I say as my eyes follow the mountain skyline that runs in the distance behind the waterfall. "How did you find it?"

"Is that really what you want to talk about, *sladkaya*? My travel tips?"

I sigh and tuck my knees up against my chest. Thin fingers of cold creep in through every crack in my blanket coverage. It feels like a message from the world: you can hide and cover all you want, but eventually, everything will get to you.

"You were right about Isla," I say. "She's far more resilient than I give her credit for."

"Underestimation seems to be your strong suit," he says. But there's no snideness in his tone. It's more like he's making an observation.

"I do that," I admit. "I guess... I guess I'd rather play it safe than assume I—or Isla, for that matter—can handle everything. Human beings are resilient, I know that. But at the same time, there's pain in all of us. Sometimes, that pain can get away from us. The fear of the pain is bigger than the pain itself. It is for me, at least."

I twist my hand around as I speak, searching for my invisible scars.

"You did that to yourself, didn't you?" he says suddenly. His voice is quiet and tired, but based on how harshly I recoil,

you'd think he screamed at me. "Come on, Kinsley, you don't think I noticed? Scars on both wrists. A decade old, at least."

He sounds almost disappointed that I'd doubt him. More underestimating, I guess.

I consider arguing. *No, you're wrong. That's not what this is. I spilled—I tried to—My hand just slipped...* But he'd see right through that, too.

And maybe it's time I started thinking about the things I've been hiding for so damn long. God knows that hiding them away hasn't helped me heal from them.

"It started a few months after my mother died," I admit. I keep my eyes rooted on the rough-hewn granite floors, unwilling or unable to meet Daniil's gaze. "I thought about killing myself, too. But then I figured, she didn't want me around when she was alive, so why would she want me around in death?"

"Maybe you just didn't want to die," Daniil suggests. "Maybe she didn't want to, either."

"It wasn't a cry for help, Daniil," I say softly, feeling my voice tremble in a way that has nothing to do with the cold. "She wanted it so badly. She'd cut her wrists so deep that the paramedics said her death was practically instant."

"Suicide isn't about killing yourself, in my experience," Daniil says. "It's about killing your pain. The difference matters."

I think about that. It makes sense. My mother could be a force when she was happy. But what was realer: the happiness or the pain?

"I asked her once why she didn't just leave him. She told me that she didn't have the luxury of leaving. I didn't know what that meant back then. Sometimes, I still don't."

"Having conversations with the dead is a waste of time," Daniil advises, his voice dipping low and making my heart rattle in my chest. "They don't talk back."

"I know. Still doesn't stop me from wishing she would, though. Just so that she can give me some closure."

“It was her job to look after you, not the other way around.” I glance up at him to see a curious expression on his face when he says it. Something angry and resentful hidden beneath the stoic calm.

He gets out of the hammock with lithe grace, walks over to where I’m curled up, and sits down next to me. Near enough that I can feel his warmth. Far enough that I have to resist the urge to inch closer.

“Who was looking after you, Daniil? Au pairs can’t exactly replace the love of a parent.”

I’m nervous asking the question. If he shuts down on me like he did back in the cabin kitchen, there’ll be no getting back to the cozy peace that lingers tentatively in the air right now.

I half-expect him to make another crude allusion to the au pair who apparently deflowered him. But he doesn’t. The look in his eyes remains caught between melancholy and memory.

“I took care of myself.”

That’s all he gives me. I can see the emotion lying beneath the armor, the tender pain, but it’s still carefully preserved behind all that steel. Visible now, which is an improvement, but still completely out of my reach.

He has a story he’s not telling me.

He has a history he’s keeping from me.

And as much as I want to know, I’m scared to push too hard for fear that he’ll push right back, and push me right out of his life in the process.

I don’t even realize that I’m tracing the scar until Daniil reaches out and takes my right hand. I stop short as he flips it around, exposing the underside of my wrist.

Under the moonlight, the scar seems to glow ethereally. It’s clearer than it’s ever been. Daniil stares down at it, his hand clutching mine from underneath as his thumb traces the two thin lines again and again.

“When did you stop?”

“When Mrs. Louisa noticed.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Your history teacher.”

“You remember.”

He smiles sadly. “I pay attention. Or else I’m doomed to repeat myself, right?”

I grin sadly and nod. “Yes, she was. She got me through the worst of my grief. Her and Emma. Even after her death, she was still trying to help me out.”

“How so?”

“Before she died, she wrote a bunch of letters. To her husband, her sisters, all her nephews and nieces. Among her stack of letters was one addressed to me.” I stop short, looking at Daniil uncertainly for a moment. “Hold on.”

I slip back into the cabin and find my backpack by the door where I’d left it. I open it and pull the zip to the discreet little pocket sewn into the bag’s lining. I’d packed all my most important documents in there: our birth certificates, passports, that kind of thing.

And this.

“Here,” I say when I re-emerge. “You can read it.”

Daniil’s eyes scan the paper. I don’t have to look over his shoulder to follow the sentences on the page. I’d memorized it a long time ago.

Dear Kinsley,

I want you to know, I understand why you didn’t come yesterday. Goodbyes are always hard, especially when you’ve had too many of them. It was a beautiful day, surrounded by my family and all the people I hold closest to my heart. And yes, that includes you.

They say that teachers, like parents, are not supposed to have favorites. But hell, I’m dying, I can say and do whatever the fudge I want. And you were always my favorite student. Not because—as you are so fond of saying—you’re broken. But because, despite all your pain and anger and bitterness, you

still find it in yourself to be kind. To be giving. To be thoughtful. To love.

Of all my students, you're the one who most reminds me of myself. You have a teacher's spirit. And I hope that one day, you can believe in yourself the way I believe in you. I hope that you can believe in others that way, too.

I know you don't want to go to college, but if you ever change your mind, get in touch with Colin Bridges. I've included his number at the bottom of this letter. He's a childhood friend, and like me, he's a teacher. If I can't guide you through the next few years of your life, at least I can nominate someone else who can.

I wish I could stick around, dear girl, but some things are out of our hands. They say we can't choose who we're born to, we can't choose when we die, and we can't choose whom we love. I don't dispute the first two. But I've always disagreed with the third. I believe we choose who we love, Kinsley. We have the power.

So don't waste that power by choosing to shut your heart from the choice. Love freely, Kinsley dear. Love often. Love well.

Your friend and teacher,

Louisa

Daniil lifts his eyes to mine. The blue of his irises softened somewhere during the read. He folds the letter reverently and hands it back to me.

"I read it so many times that the paper started to give way," I admit. "So I stopped, but I can still recite the whole thing. Word for word."

"Bridges, huh?" he asks, zeroing in on the name.

I nod. "I didn't contact him for years. I was stubborn. I was angry. But I did decide to go to college. Not that I was very committed, though. Otherwise, I wouldn't have dropped out the moment Tom proposed."

I glance at him cautiously, waiting for a reaction. Judgment. Derision. Or a little of both, the Daniil special.

“It was a bad decision,” I say before he can.

“We all make them.”

And that’s it. Simple as that. He brushes off a massive mistake like it was a foot in the wrong shoe, easily rectified. “I contacted Colin later, when Isla was a toddler and I was in desperate need of a job. Turned out he was willing to give me one, provided I take all the necessary courses to get my teaching certification. He threw me a lifeline at a time when everyone was reluctant to give a single mom and college dropout a chance.”

Daniil eyes the letter in my hands. “So... do you agree?” he asks.

“Agree with what?”

“About love being something you choose.”

I’m not expecting the question. Least of all from him. Maybe that’s his tactic to get an honest answer out of me. “I don’t know,” I admit. “The romantic in me likes the idea of falling in love without choice.”

“You find that romantic?”

“You don’t?”

He shakes his head. “It sounds like slavery. I think a decision carries far more weight. A conscious choice rather than an accidental one. We make our lives the way we want them to be, Kinsley. We are in charge. We are in the driver’s seat. All you have to do is reach out and take the wheel.”

I open my mouth to reply, then think better of it. Instead, I sink into the soft cushions of the sofa and breathe in the fresh mountain air. My skin feels like it’s alive, and my chest feels lighter than it has in years.

It’s not hard to figure out why.

“Do you mind if I lie here a little longer?” I ask quietly.

His eyes meet mine, and I feel the fabric of our connection the same way I did the first day we met. Elusive and fragile, like a river-soaked wedding veil—but undeniable.

“You can lie here as long as you like.”

DANIIL

I hold up my burner phone and try to catch a signal. No such luck, though. One bar won't cut it.

I move three steps to the right, closer to the glass window that overlooks the western valley. A second bar turns green, then a third, and I quickly hit dial on Petro's number before I lose it.

"Christ almighty," Petro complains when he picks up. "It's early."

"I have a job for you."

He makes a strangled sound with his throat. I can practically imagine him trying to sit up in bed and think straight long enough to form a coherent sentence.

"Wh—uh, what kind of, um, job?" He stifles a yawn.

"Write a letter to a Mr. Colin Bridges. Principal at Crestmore Academy. Mention that he'll get an explanation for Kinsley's absence when she's in a position to provide one, but leave it mostly open-ended so that she can speak for herself when the time comes. And I want you to include a hundred-thousand-dollar check."

"A hundred whatty what?"

"Mark it as a donation to the school," I explain. "To be used by the principal in any manner he sees fit."

"Okay, follow-up question: Why?"

Because it's important to Kinsley.

“Because I fucking said so.”

Petro’s silence speaks volumes, but he’s smart enough to keep his mouth shut. “Aye-aye, captain. Ask and ye shall receive.”

“Good. I want those IDs done soon, too. We don’t have time to waste.”

I hang up and head back to the cabin. Kinsley fell asleep on the balcony last night, her dark hair splayed across the white cushions, her skin pimpled with goosebumps.

I’d carried her inside and placed her on the bed next to Isla. She hadn’t stirred the entire time. But her fingers had wrapped themselves around mine and it had taken some prying to get her to release me.

I can’t lie: I stood there for a good ten minutes and just... watched them. My daughter. Pure, innocent, brimming with all the potential that had been drained out of my childhood.

And her mother. Beautiful and broken, in so many of the same ways I am.

Sure, she had started out as an alibi. A runaway bride in a convenient position for me to manipulate. But that’s not why I wanted to touch her, kiss her, breathe her in like a drug.

When we met and I felt this way at first sight, I’d chalked it up to months of isolation. But I’d left her sleeping in that car and gone on to spend the next ten years damn near celibate because I couldn’t seem to find a woman who made me want to touch her the way that Kinsley had.

The brokenness inside of me had recognized the brokenness inside of her.

It happened last night, too, when she bared part of her soul to me and I sat there and tried to pretend like I wasn’t fucking mesmerized by it.

I’m still mesmerized by it. By her.

I just don’t know what will happen if she realizes that.

The cabin is still quiet when I walk in. I go straight to the shower, strip off my clothes, and step inside the walk-in

shower. The floor is coarse black granite and the walls are smooth white marble, all but the one I'm facing, which is a single pane of unbroken glass that offers me an uninterrupted view of the waterfall.

My back aches as the bullets of water beat down on me. Sleeping on the balcony couch left me riddled with knots.

When the bathroom door swings open, I lunge for my towel, expecting to see Isla walking sleepily into the wrong bathroom. But instead, it's Kinsley, her pajama top askew off one shoulder and her hair in a laughable state of dishevelment.

How does she still manage to look sexy despite all that?

The door snaps shut behind her. She frowns when she hears the sound of running water. Then she lifts her eyes, catches mine, and gasps.

Her cheeks flush red with embarrassment, but she doesn't quite turn away. Instead, her eyes dip down, following the length of my body as though she has no control over them.

"Enjoying the view?" I muse.

That seems to snap her out of it. "Oh God, I'm sorry—"

She twists around and tries to retreat, but she's forgotten that there's a door in her way. She bumps right into it, and the momentum of her failed exit causes her to fall ass backwards onto the white marble tile.

"Ow," she groans, splayed across the floor.

I turn off the water and walk over to her, intentionally ignoring the four fluffy white towels on their hooks. Her cheeks turn an even deeper shade of red, but she accepts my hand and I pull her back up to her feet.

"Thanks," she murmurs. "My head hurts."

"How's your ass?"

A burst of laughter sneaks through her embarrassment. "Sore," she says. "It'll probably be black and blue in an hour." She stands there, shifting her weight from one foot to another as though she's not sure what to do now.

I arch an eyebrow. “If you need the bathroom, I can step out.”

She raises her eyebrows. “No, sorry, I—you should finish your shower. I’ll just... um, I’ll just... leave. I’ll leave. Sorry, I already said that. I...”

She looks over one shoulder, then the other, then finally manages to locate the door. She rushes through it and shuts it hard behind her, leaving me standing there with a stupid smile on my face.

By the time I finish my shower and walk out into the living area, Kinsley has regrouped and wiped the sleep and the disorientation from her face.

“Bathroom’s all yours,” I say, rubbing a towel against my hair.

She’s trying very hard not to look at my naked chest as she gives me a cursory nod. “Right. Thanks.”

We switch places and she slips into the bathroom, while I take a seat on the sprawling sectional. “Morning, Papa,” Isla says, popping up from behind the couch like a meerkat.

“Good morning, princess. Did you sleep well?”

“So good,” she chirps with a bright smile. “I saw the waterfall!” She plops down onto the sofa next to me and yawns. “I wish Aunt Emma was here, though. She would have loved it. The three of us used to take road trips when I was younger.”

I feel a pang of something that I’m not accustomed to feeling. Something dark and bitter and slightly resentful. While I’d been building my Bratva, another woman helped Kinsley raise Isla.

It’s not jealousy I’m feeling, though. It’s something I’ve only ever felt with one other person in my life.

Regret.

I’d rather feel jealousy, truth be told. Jealousy is something you can act on. Regret, on the other hand, is a useless emotion. It forces you to look back at things you can’t change and dwell on possibilities you’ve already lost.

“Did you ever take road trips with your parents?” Isla asks. The girl is every bit as curious as her mother.

“No. If I went on any trips at all, I was usually on my own.”

She frowns. “That doesn’t sound like a lot of fun.”

“You learn to make your own fun.”

“Didn’t you have friends?” Isla ventures with a strange kind of tentativeness.

“To be honest, no. I didn’t have very many friends growing up.” I hear the click of the bathroom door, and I’m immediately hit with the wafting smell of strawberry and citrus. Something occurs to me. I turn to Isla and add, “In fact, I was bullied a lot in school.”

She stares at me in shock. I might as well have grown a second set of eyes. “That can’t be true,” she says suspiciously. “You’re just saying that to make me feel better.”

“Why would I just say that?”

“Because you know the girls at school aren’t nice to me.”

Goddammit. I should have taken a fucking hit out on the parents of those little shits. If a child has to pay for the sins of the parent, why not the other way around?

“My father wasn’t the nicest man. He had a lot of enemies. And some of their sons went to the same schools I did,” I tell her. “They did everything they could to hurt me.”

“Were you sad?”

“A little, at first,” I tell her. “But I realized quickly that the only thing that bullies respond to is bravery. Once they realized that nothing could get to me, they left me alone.”

“But you still didn’t have any friends.”

“I didn’t need any,” I say. “As I got older, I collected people that were worth keeping around. Trust me, Isla: it’s better to have one true friend than a hundred fake ones.”

She sighs. “I don’t even have one real one.”

“Because you haven’t had the opportunity to make any,” I point out. “But you and Molly hit it off, didn’t you?”

She nods uncertainly. “But it was just the one time.”

“Sometimes, that’s all it takes to forge a friendship. You did it with Molly, and you’ll do it again with other kids. You just have to figure out which ones are worth collecting.” I smile and pinch at her chin with my fingers. “Just because you’re alone doesn’t have to mean you’re lonely.”

Isla nods thoughtfully. “I don’t care about not having friends so much,” she admits. “I just don’t like getting bullied.”

“No one does, *moya devushka*. But you have to hold your ground and fight right back.”

“My school has a no-hitting policy.”

“Sometimes, you gotta break—”

“Okay!” Kinsley says as she bursts out of the bathroom, clapping her hands together and interrupting my pep talk. “Isla, it’s getting late and we have breakfast to get to. Why don’t you go shower?”

“But Papa and I were talking!” she whines.

“And you can talk more later. Right now is shower time. Chop, chop. Move your booty.”

Isla throws Kinsley an exasperated glance and sulks towards the bathroom. When the door clicks shut, she glares at me.

“Were you seriously advising her to hit other kids?”

“Not kids. Bullies.”

She collapses into the sofa next to me. “Daniil! You cannot give a nine-year-old permission to get physical with anyone.”

“If someone tries to hold her head underwater, then you bet your ass I’m gonna tell her to fight back. By whatever means necessary.”

“That’s irresponsi—” She stops short, her eyes landing on me with curiosity and concern. “Wait. Did that happen to you?”

“What?”

“Did some bully hold your head underwater?”

I shrug. “It was a long time ago.”

“Daniil,” she says again, and her voice is so unbearably soft that I want to physically pull away from it—because if I don’t, I’ll let it soothe parts of me that have been on fire for a long, long time.

“Your sympathy is a waste of my time, *sladkaya*.”

“It makes sense now,” she says softly, unbothered by my outburst. “Why you’re so closed-off from everything. From everyone.”

I raise my eyebrows. “Oh, you’ve got everything figured out now, haven’t you? You can explain away all the things you don’t like about me. Someone picked on me when I was too young to fight back and everything that’s ever happened since then is just me fighting back. Don’t be so fucking reductive.”

Even as I’m saying it, I hate myself. I hate that my claws are out. I hate that being understood makes me want to create a force field around myself and repel everything within a ten-mile radius.

It’s better this way, though. She deserves better than me.

“Daniil,” she says again, reaching out to me. “Hey—”

“For God’s sake, Kinsley,” I snap. “Are you really this naïve?”

She stops short, her hand freezing just shy of me. She looks confused for a moment, and then she starts to look... angry.

“Wait...”

That’s right, sladkaya. Believe what I need you to believe.

“Did you just lie to her? There were no bullies, were there? No one held you anywhere.”

“She’s nine,” I growl. “She needs to feel like she’s not alone. She needs to believe that someone went through the same things she did and came out on the other side. She needs to see a success story.”

“Right,” Kinsley mutters. “I forgot you’re the Father of the fucking Year.” She shakes her head and lets her hands drop to her sides. Her eyes scan the balcony for a moment before they turn back to me. She’s still searching and coming up empty. “Are you so scared of allowing me to see the real you?”

“You’re asking the wrong questions,” I snarl. “I’m starting to think you don’t have it in you to ask the right ones.”

“Maybe you don’t have it in you to answer,” she fires back.

There’s no anger in her tone anymore. Just the sad resignation of someone who’s just realized that they’re fighting an uphill battle, and that gravity always wins in the end.

“But you know what, Daniil? As much as you try to push me away, it’s not going to work. Because it’s not just you and me anymore. There’s Isla. And no matter how difficult this is, there’s no escaping the fact that you’re her father. So you can push. But I’m going to be here. I can’t get rid of you, Daniil. And you can’t get rid of me.”

Yeah, princess. Tell me something I don’t know.

KINSLEY

When Isla reemerges from the bathroom, I leap to my feet. “Let’s go for a walk. We need to get some fresh air.”

That’s true—the ride here was long and uncomfortable. But I’m mostly suggesting it because it’ll be easier to ignore the prickliness in the air between Daniil and me if we aren’t trapped within these claustrophobic rock walls.

Isla trills her agreement, to my surprise, then grabs a thin sweater and pulls it over her powder-blue overalls. She snags her sketchpad and pencil case on the way out.

Daniil says nothing, but he rises and follows us to the door. I pretend like it doesn’t matter to me one way or the other if he’s coming.

“Wait!” Isla yelps when we’re halfway outside. “I forgot my spy glasses.”

She darts back into the cabin, leaving Daniil and me outside on the steps carved into the cliff-face. Our eyes meet by accident, and he turns away almost immediately.

I’m expecting the freeze-out, but it still stings.

The silver lining is that if he spends the day ignoring me, I can observe him to my heart’s content without worrying about being caught. Seeing all the things I didn’t see until now.

I notice a stray thread on the cuff of the white cashmere sweater he’s wearing. Without thinking, I step forward and grab the thread. He freezes as I bring it to my teeth and tear it off.

I fling the loose thread to the ground and glance up at him. He's watching me warily, his eyes dark and bright against the lingering wetness of his hair. I can smell him this close. I can feel each individual breath rumbling through his chest, and I want to place my hand over his heart just so that I can count the heartbeats to go with it.

"Got them!"

I jerk back as Isla erupts through the entrance waving her spy glasses in the air. "Okay then," I say, blinking myself back to reality. "Off we go."

We find the trail we drove up last night and meander down it. It's a different experience retracing the pathway in daylight. The land is rich with rock and trees warped by tens of thousands of years of wind and rain. Towering red pines fold over us in a natural canopy that keeps the strongest rays of the sun at bay.

"This is so cool," Isla gasps, jumping from stone to stone along the path like she's traversing a minefield. "Watch out for the lava, Mom!"

"Lava?"

"Yeah," Isla says with a gleeful nod, pointing at the red soil folded between each stone. "That's lava. It'll burn you if you step on it."

"Noted. I will tread carefully."

When I glance back over my shoulder, I notice Daniil is several paces behind us. His eyes are mostly fixed on Isla, which is probably why his expression is much less grim than it is whenever it flickers to me for a moment.

Something in the woods captures Isla's attention. A flash of white fur—a bunny or a little fawn, perhaps. She squeals in delight, shoves her sketchpad and pencil case into my hands, and takes off after it. I smile at the sounds of her crashing through the underbrush just out of sight behind the first row of tree trunks.

I turn to Daniil, whose expression has turned back to wary caution. It's funny how quickly the air changes between us

when Isla is no longer around to act as the buffer.

“It’s cold,” I murmur.

“You should have brought a thicker sweater.”

“Maybe what I need is a fur coat,” I kid. “I’m thinking mink. Or maybe chinchilla. Whatever’s the most expensive.”

I’m joking with him, but he doesn’t come anywhere close to cracking a smile. “I can get you one if that’s what you want,” he says. “I can get you anything money can buy.”

“What if I want something that doesn’t come with a price tag?” I ask quietly.

He grimaces. “Are you still mad that I lied to Isla?”

I just sigh and say nothing. I sound like an ungrateful bitch no matter what words I fumble up, so I might as well just keep my lips sealed.

He smiles at last, like he can hear the turmoil in my head, but it’s not a nice smile. It makes me squirm on my feet in an effort to get away from him. I force myself to stay rooted in place.

“You’d prefer if I really had been bullied, wouldn’t you? If someone had put me in my place at least once in my life.”

“Of course not—”

“Don’t lie. That’s exactly what you’re hoping for.”

My lips draw tight. “Why would I hope for that?”

“Maybe because they did what you can’t. Or maybe because then you can justify my cruelty, you can explain away my coldness, you can cling on to the hope that you can change me.” He hedges closer to me, his scent mixing with the woody spice of the outdoors. “Because that’s what you do, isn’t it? You agreed to marry Tom, not because you loved him, but because you thought you could fix him.”

I’ve gone from cold to hot in the blink of an eye. It’s an itchy, uncomfortable sort of heat. The heat of an unwanted spotlight blazing right on me. My body feels prickly with it.

Guess I won't be needing that chinchilla fur coat after all.

"I... I don't know what I was thinking when I agreed to marry Tom."

He looks me right in the eye. Despite the fact that that's what I've been yearning for all morning, I wish he'd stop.

"Yes, you do, *sladkaya*," he insists in a dangerous growl. "You were trying to change the narrative. You were trying to find a man just a little bit like your father, so that you could correct the mistakes your mother couldn't."

I stare at him. Both dumbfounded and fascinated. Both resistant and in awe.

"Tell me honestly. Did you love him?"

I frown. "I thought I did."

"But did you?"

I shake my head. "No, I don't think so."

"My point exactly. You're a romantic, Kinsley. Why would an incurable romantic marry a man she didn't love? Unless she was trying to exorcise her demons."

My entire body is tingling. It feels as though anything that touches me right now will combust right along with me.

"I'm going back," I announce.

"Suit yourself. Isla and I will keep exploring."

"Fine," I snap. "Whatever you want."

I turn on my heel and head back to the cabin, feeling confused and annoyed and severely let down by my own failed intentions. I'm still burning up from the inside with all these feelings that don't have an outlet.

Well, one outlet seems obvious: marching back to Daniil and telling him to stick it where the sun don't shine.

It's not until I'm back in the cabin that I realize that I played right into his hands. It was never about me or Tom or my father; it was just another defense mechanism to keep me at

bay. If I'm busy defending myself, I'm too busy to focus on him. That's his whole game plan.

And it's working.

"Dammit," I mutter to myself.

I flop back onto the couch, angry that he can manipulate me so easily. It's not exactly fair. He's working with so many advantages.

Those steely blue eyes.

Those formidable shoulders.

That cutting jawline.

And as the electricity sidles over my body like a second skin, I realize what I need to release the tension clawing at my spine. I know what I need to relax. I know the only outlet that will work.

And since I can't have that...

I close my eyes and slide my hand up my dress.

Of course, I think of him as I do.

DANIIL

“Once we cross the hanging bridge, there isn’t as much coverage,” I warn Isla as she points out the path she wants to take on our hike. “You might need some sunscreen.”

“What about you?” she asks.

“The sun wouldn’t dare burn me. It knows better.”

She laughs. Her laughter comes more easily as of late. It’s as if being away has breathed new life into her. She’s starting to look less like a haunted kid, and more like a happy one.

“Wait here,” I tell her. “I’ll grab some sunscreen from the cabin. Be back in five.”

She shrugs and goes to inspect a miniature mountain of pine cones as I walk back to the cabin, wondering if Kinsley is licking her wounds or sharpening her claws.

The former makes me wince with discomfort. The latter makes me annoyingly hard.

I swipe the keycard, the lock goes green, and the door swings inward without much of a sound. I keep it ajar as I head towards the bathroom to rummage through the medicine cabinet.

The sound of heavy breathing makes me pause. Then I clock one leg hanging over the edge of the sofa.

It’s Kinsley. Her head is thrown back against the armrest, her eyes are closed, and her chest rises and falls erratically, one strap of her dress dangling carelessly off her left shoulder.

She bites down on her lower lip as her fingers play her slit.

My cock stands at attention. But as much as I want to interrupt, a part of me just wants to stand there, an appreciative voyeur, basking in the vision she makes.

An uninhibited goddess, lost in her own pleasure, her lips forming a name that's a breath away from being spoken.

I step back behind the wall that separates the bedroom from the living area. But my boot makes a scraping sound against the granite floor and she gasps, her eyes flying open, instantly alert.

She locks on me as intense color floods her cheeks. It's like watching a painting move. Red blush and alabaster skin and iridescent green eyes, all swirling and seductive. "Daniil! Wh-what are you doing here? I thought you and Isla were going on a hike."

"We are," I say. "Just needed to grab some sunscreen."

I duck into the bathroom, grab what I need, and step back out again. Kinsley is on her feet now, rearranging her dress and trying not to look like a guilty kid who's just been caught with her hand down the cookie jar. No pun intended.

"Got the sunscreen," I add, holding it up for her.

She nods and gulps. "Okay then. Bye."

The blush on her cheeks has extended down to her neck. I can see the blotchiness curl around her collarbones. Those goddamn collarbones...

"What were you doing?"

She stiffens a little, trying to guess how much I saw. "Nothing. I was just trying to... take a nap on the couch."

"Dreaming about anything in particular?"

"No," she says, her voice faltering.

I shrug. "I guess I better be going then."

"Yeah," she says, a little too eagerly. "Have fun."

I make for the door, but just before I slip out, I turn and toss her the sunscreen. “Here,” I say with a smirk and a wink. “I think you might need it more than we will.”

Before she can answer, I turn and step outside. I chuckle most of the way back to where Isla is waiting for me.

“You didn’t get the sunscreen?” she asks, searching my hands.

“Sorry, princess. Couldn’t find it. We’ll do without for today.”

She shrugs. “Okay. The sun wouldn’t dare burn me, either.”

I laugh. I know she’s just mimicking me, trying to be tough, trying to be independent. Her deepest nature is closer to her mother’s than mine. Then again, I’d been to the hard knock school of life. Bruises and broken bones were my lessons. Love and tenderness were fictional characters that had no place in my childhood.

I intend for things to be different for Isla. I have to make up for those lost years somehow. Finding out how to be a part of her world, though, is my biggest problem. How do you parent with love, kindness, patience and all the rest, when those emotions are so alien to you?

“What are you thinking about right now?”

I glance down at Isla, whose eyes are locked onto my face like she’s trying to decipher a riddle she doesn’t like. Her mother’s not fond of riddles, either, as I recall.

“Nothing, *dorogaya*.”

“You look like that a lot,” she accuses. “You can’t be thinking about nothing every time. Mom says that when people get quiet like that, they’re pondering big life decisions.”

“She says that, does she?”

“Yeah. She says that’s what she’s doing every time she gets quiet like that.”

“Something tells me your mom doesn’t get quiet very often.”

“Only when we used to go for drives to the forest.”

My pulse quickens. “What forest?”

“The forest with the road down the middle,” she says as if that’s self-explanatory, kicking a stone from her path. “It’s super long and super boring. We didn’t even live close by, but she’d drive there sometimes when I was little. I don’t know why she liked it so much.”

Because it’s the forest where you were conceived, little one.

“What did you guys do when you visited the forest?”

Isla shrugs. “She usually bought us burgers and we’d sit in the car and eat. There was nothing else to do there. There was nothing to see.”

Just a bunch of thorny memories to wade through.

I imagine Isla and Kinsley driving along that lonely stretch of road. Nothing but trees on either side of them. Isla, slightly confused, very bored. Kinsley, just... searching.

If I had given in to my own sentimentality and done the same—God knows I wanted to—would we have crossed paths sooner?

“Mom took me there a few times. Then I said I’d rather stay behind with Aunt Emma. I like burgers, but not that much.”

I snort with laughter. “What do you like that much?”

“Drawing!”

“Why do you like drawing so much?”

We stop and sit at a cliff edge to gaze out over the lush green valley below.

“Because you can be anything on paper,” Isla says. “A mermaid. A warrior. A nun.”

“A nun?”

She nods. “A nun with a sword and a warhammer.”

“Nuns don’t have swords or warhammers.”

She gives me a smug grin. “On paper, they do. If I draw them that way.”

I laugh. “Touché.”

“Mom took me to a church one day,” Isla says. “The nuns were really nice. One of them snuck me a biscuit while Mom was talking to the statue of the crying man.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah,” Isla says with a nod. “She uses his name a lot, but she doesn’t really talk to him anymore. We were only there because Aunt Emma’s grandma died and Mom and I went to carry her. To help her not be so sad.”

“Support her, you mean. You went to support Emma.”

“Yeah,” she says, blushing a little. “That’s what I meant.”

“Was your mom close to Emma’s grandmother?”

“Not really,” Isla says. “I asked Mom why she was crying all by herself in the church, and she told me she was crying because she didn’t cry before and she felt bad about that. Mom says weird things sometimes.”

Isla laughs, and the sound makes my skin warm. It’s more than just the sound of her laughter; it’s the simple moment of sitting here with her. A moment I thought I’d never have. A moment I’m not sure I deserve.

“Your mom may be weird, but she loves you. You know that, right?”

Isla’s shoulders slump forward. “I know. I just wish she talked to me like she talks to Aunt Emma.”

“Emma’s her friend. You’re her daughter. You may not realize it right now, but one day, you’ll appreciate having had a parent in your life. You only get two of those.”

“But I only had one of those,” Isla challenges. “For a long time.”

“That was my fault,” I tell her. “I’m fixing it.”

Her features slacken for a moment as she tries to figure out how she feels about that. “Well, you’re here now,” she says in the end. “And I don’t want you to go anywhere.”

I frown, realizing that she’s walked me toward a promise that I can’t in good faith agree to make. “Even if I go somewhere,

I'll come back, Isla." I rise and take her hand. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"Down the trail."

I hoist her up onto my back as she squeals with surprise. Then I take the fast route down to the river. It takes me fifteen minutes of hard movement, but the cold air hitting my muscles keeps the adrenaline pumping until we get to flat ground.

When we reach the valley floor, I duck down and Isla hops off my back. "That was so cool!" she exclaims, her eyes bright with exhilaration. She looks up at the spot we'd been sitting not so long ago. "It's so high up!"

I pull off my shoes and step into the river. Isla gawks at me in shock. "What are you doing, Papa? You'll catch a cold!"

She's mimicking her mother now. Only an overprotected child would come up with something so damn sensible. "A cold won't kill you, Isla," I tell her. "Playing it safe just might."

Tentatively, she pulls off her own sneakers and kicks them to the side. She climbs onto one of the rock beds and giggles as the river surges past her.

"You gonna come in here or what?" I tease.

She smiles past her fear. "I want to... but the water's cold."

Little droplets pepper her skin from the spray off the stones. She's already got goosebumps, but I'm not concerned. What did I tell Kinsley last night? *The cold lets you know you're alive.* "It's only cold at first. Then it gets easier."

She stares at me with awe. "You're not cold?"

"Not anymore."

She squeals a little as she lifts one foot tentatively off the rock. At the last minute, she changes her mind and scurries backward to safety.

She's scared, but her face is alive with anticipation. All the melancholy that clung to her features has disappeared. This is the real Isla. The one hiding behind a mask of fear and insecurity.

She just needed permission. Permission to be reckless, to be fearless, to be loud. To be brave.

“Isla.”

She snaps her attention towards me, caught by my somberness. For a moment, she looks nervous, as though I’m going to turn the tables on her and tell her she shouldn’t be doing this at all. Like it was a big test and she failed it.

“I’ll always come back,” I promise. “No matter where I go. No matter how far. I will always, always come back to you. You’ll never be alone again.”

She stares at me for a moment, weighing how serious I am. In the end, she accepts it at pure face value, the way only a child can. “Okay. I believe you, Papa.”

Is it me, or does she look a foot taller in the blink of an eye? Before I can look closer, she takes a deep breath and jumps right into the water. She screams as she bobs below the surface, then splashes back up, cackling in pure, unbridled joy.

Her teeth chatter as she cries out, “It’s s-s-so c-c-cold!”

I laugh. “But how does it feel?”

“Am-m-azing!” she squeals.

I offer her my hand. “Come on. Walk to me.”

“What if I fall?” she asks fearfully. “The s-s-stones are slippery.”

“If you fall, I will catch you.”

“Promise?”

“I swear it.”

KINSLEY

I perch on the sofa with my elbows resting on my knees. The bottle of sunscreen sits on the coffee table just in front of me. Neither of us are blinking.

I've been in a faceoff with this stupid inanimate object for the past twenty minutes. The most pathetic part about this pointless little staring contest?

I think I'm losing.

"Goddammit!" I exclaim at last to the empty cabin as I slump back against the sofa and concede defeat. "Why? Of all moments to walk in, why *then*?"

I grab the bottle of sunscreen and fling it across the room. It hits the sturdy balcony window and falls to the ground with an unceremonious plop. It doesn't even have the courtesy to explode and make a satisfying mess.

"Yeah?" I bite out after it. "Well, screw you, too."

Did he know? Did he know that I was thinking of him? Did he know that it wasn't even his body I was thinking about as I drove myself to orgasm? No, I was thinking about his godforsaken *smile*. The way his eyes seem to disappear when he laughs, rare as that is. How the blue melts into gray when he talks to our daughter.

I get off the sofa and start pacing. Not only was I unsuccessful in my bid to blow off steam, I'm now even more wound up. There's tension lancing up and down my spine, hungry for a way out and finding none.

I grab my sweater and keycard and leave the cabin. If I'm not going to be able to get off in peace, at least I can walk off the frustration.

I don't think about where I'm going; I just go wherever my legs take me. I walk for so long that my feet start to hurt. The trail I'm following winds toward a lookout point on one of the many cliff's edges surrounding the cabin. I stop and peer out at the thin ribbon of river below.

Something about the red-gold mountains in front of me reminds me of a long-ago trip to the Grand Canyon. The first and last trip I'd ever taken with my parents.

Dad had been sent out there for work, and he'd insisted that Mom and I come along. I was eight, maybe nine, and the idea of flying in a plane was the most exciting thing that had ever happened to me. At that point, Arizona may as well have been Paris.

Mom slept through the entire flight, courtesy of the two sleeping pills and half a bottle of Pinot Grigio she'd consumed beforehand. Dad spent most of the flight drinking mini-bottles of whiskey and having loud, boorish conversations with strangers.

And me? I'd sat tucked between them, feeling like the luckiest girl in the world. Too young to know any better.

We landed and went our separate ways. Dad in one car, Mom and me in another. He'd promised to take us to the Grand Canyon once he was done with his meeting. But then he'd sent Mom a text message telling us to go ahead without him.

She'd gotten really quiet. I remember that far-off look in her eyes, too. "Haunted" is the word I'd use now. Back then, I didn't understand, so I ignored it in that way little kids do. Then she'd packed up a backpack with water, wet wipes, and a bunch of snacks from the hotel fridge and we headed off together.

We parked in the lot with the rest of the tourists and trudged to the edge. I remember that Mom led us down a little ways, as far from other people as we could get.

The canyon was incomprehensibly big to a girl my size. I wanted to love it. I wanted to feel like it was a big and beautiful world and I'd have my whole life to explore it. And for a moment, that's exactly how I felt—awed. Hopeful.

Then I looked at my mother, and my heart plunged right into my stomach.

Because she looked like all she wanted in this big, beautiful world was to leave it. To jump.

Her eyes were closed and her arms spread wide. The wind caught the fabric of her shirt until it fluttered at her sides like wings. I wondered wildly if she jumped, would she fly?

Back in the present, I take a deep breath and turn my back on the mountains. She hadn't jumped that day.

But she wanted to.

I leave the lookout point and continue walking. Sometimes, I stick to the trail and sometimes, I don't. The whole time, I try not to think about my parents. Obviously, that's all I end up thinking about.

My feet carry me in a long loop back towards the cabin. Up the steps, swipe my card, through the door. I'm in a weird sort of daze as I float through the house. It's not until I hear Daniil's voice that I snap back to reality.

"Sladkaya?"

I whirl around to find him standing at the threshold between the cabin and the balcony. He doesn't seem concerned with the dirt tracks I've left through the room. His eyes are focused on me, sharp and unyielding.

"You're back."

He doesn't respond to that. Instead, he steps onto the balcony and walks to me. "What happened?"

I raise my eyes to his. I'm astonished to feel tears on my cheeks. "I don't want to be Alice. That's not my name. It's... it's too sad."

His eyes glitter over my face. "Why did you choose it?"

“I guess I thought I could shake away the sadness. Make it my own.”

He looks down, and that’s when I notice that my hand is curled around his arm. My nails are digging into his flesh as though I’m trying to permanently latch on.

With his free hand, he curls a finger under my chin and pulls my face up. He doesn’t say anything, though. It’s almost like he just wants to look at me.

“I don’t want to be like my mother. I don’t want to jump,” I whisper. “I don’t want to dream of jumping.”

He nods as if that garbled bit of nonsense is something he can understand perfectly well. And shoot, maybe he can. Maybe he knows me better than I know myself.

“Then don’t jump, Kinsley,” he whispers right back, his breath ghosting warm and minty across my face. “*Fly.*”

DANIIL

Another day, another hunt for cell reception. A lifetime passes between the first green bar and the second.

I pace around the cabin as I wait. Just one more bar, that's all I need...

“Goddammit.”

I stop at the window and glance down. I can see Isla and Kinsley standing by the elaborate stone birdbath. A pair of warblers are studiously ignoring them as they rinse off in the cool mountain water.

Isla is watching the birds dance around the fountain, mesmerized. She's got her sketchpad in hand and she's trying desperately to catch their likeness before they hop away.

Kinsley has been quiet since she came back from her walk yesterday. The look on her face seared itself in my mind.

Those heavy, haunted eyes. Nightmares of her mother written there like they were etched on her very bones. You can't outrun what's carved into your soul. No matter how fast and how far you go.

I know how that feels. To have a thorn between your ribs, a knife stuck in your back. A bloodstain on your fingertips that won't scrub off.

As if she can sense that I'm watching them, Kinsley turns her head up. She catches my eyes for a moment, but just when I think she might smile, she looks away.

Grimacing, I glance down and realize that I'm staring at three bars.

I press Call. The phone starts ringing. I have to wait a long time for Petro to answer, and by the time he does, I'm already pissed.

"Took you long enough."

"Sorry, boss. Was busy."

His voice doesn't sound right. Something's off. I can hear it in the heavy way he's breathing, as though it's a struggle just to talk.

"Gregor approached you," I guess.

He sighs. "Not personally. But his brain-dead goons brought a message from him. Gotta say, they may be brain-dead and all, but they sure know how to pack a punch."

I stiffen. "How bad is it?"

"According to the esteemed Dr. Ogilvy, I have two broken ribs, a deviated septum, and a fair few bruises and cuts. Oh, and my pinky finger hurts like a motherfucker."

"He gave the order to accost my right-hand man on the street?" I growl.

"They asked about your whereabouts. They even asked nicely at first. But when I said that I'd rather fuck a one-legged hooker with herpes than tell them a goddamn word, that's when the punching started. Luckily, I wasn't rolling alone. But by the time my crew showed up, I had—well, you heard the list. Plus, you should see the other guy, et cetera. You know how that goes."

"Motherfuckers."

"He means business, brother." The laughter is gone from Petro's voice.

I should've been there.

I look towards the birdbath, but Isla and Kinsley have both disappeared. "He'll pay for this."

“I know. So will the fucker who punched me in the face. My nose has always been my best feature.”

“This is an open act of aggression,” I growl.

“You sound surprised by that.”

“He’s got more to lose than I do.”

“Bro, you’re the one with a little tyke and a baby mama.”

“Petro, I’m not in the mood.”

“Hey, I’m the one with two broken ribs. You don’t hear me complaining. The stakes were always gonna be high, Daniil. We knew that. Even before the kid was in the picture.”

I lean against the wall and rub my temples with one hand.

“He’s not going to hurt her.”

“Is that wishful thinking on your part, or is there a piece of logic in there that I’m missing? Why wouldn’t he hurt her? He already showed he’s willing to snatch her up just to prove a point.”

“Isla is not some random girl, Petro. He wouldn’t hurt her. *Krov’ gushche vody.*”

Blood is thicker than water.

Petro’s answer is swift and succinct. “That didn’t stop him from killing your mother and sending you her fingers in a box, Daniil. That didn’t save Jude.”

I want to break something. No—I want to break *him*, the bastard that took Isla, that took my mother, that took away my ability to look at Kinsley with anything but fear of what will happen if he takes her from me, too.

“My mother was not his blood. Isla is. Either way, I’m not taking the risk.” I clear my throat. “I want you to do one more thing.”

“Anything,” he answers automatically. “You know that.”

“I’ve got a name change for you,” I say. “For the IDs. I want hers to be—” I break off when I hear a sound from behind. I

turn to find Kinsley staring at me, her eyes wide, her face pale. Fuck. “Petro, I’ll text you instructions.”

I hang up while he’s still talking. Kinsley walks into the room and shuts the door behind her. She looks shaky, like her knees are seconds away from giving out.

“Don’t lie to me, Daniil,” she says, the words coming through her lips in panicked gusts. “Please.”

I watch the way her fingers tremble, the way she looks like she’s fragile enough to break off into small fragments and blow away in the wind.

“You said before that I don’t ask the right questions,” she says softly. “Maybe you were right about that. I’m trying to do it now. Gregor Semenov: who is he?”

Inod slowly, even as my heart pounds painfully against my chest. “Now, that is the right question.”

“Are you going to answer it?” Her jaw is tight. She takes a tentative step forward, almost as though she wants to touch me. Then she stops mid-step, and she waits.

I close my eyes. “Gregor Semenov is my father.”

She exhales slowly. “How did I miss that?”

“Because I made sure you would miss it,” I tell her bluntly. “I don’t go around advertising our relationship. The people who know, know.”

She shakes her head. “I... I don’t understand.”

“No. Which is why I avoid the subject.”

“Vlasov,” she says. “Not Semenov. You changed your name?”

“In a manner of speaking. Alina Vlasov was my mother.”

The mention of my mother makes Kinsley’s eyes go wide, her green eyes flashing a shade or two darker. She looks both horrified and sick at the same time.

“She’s the one you spoke up for,” she says, stepping towards me again. Except this time, she doesn’t stop midway. She

doesn't stop until she's almost in my arms. "She's the one you tried to protect."

I nod, unable to bring myself to speak.

"He... he put you in jail for trying to defend your own mother?"

"He was never exactly Father of the Year material."

She's still processing. The dominant expression on her face is shock. But I know it won't be long until other emotions hit her. Alarm. Disgust. Detachment.

Her arms are heavy at her sides, but she's still looking at my face like she's searching for something. "What happened that day, Daniil?"

"What does it matter?" I sneer. I can already feel it happening now that she knows the truth—I can see myself turning into the very thing I swore I would never become. "This was over a decade ago. That day is buried in the past, along with my conscience."

She frowns. "I don't believe that. I don't believe *you* believe that, either."

"It's not my concern what you believe."

I turn, but she grabs my arm before I can turn my back on her. She pulls me forward, with more force than I would have thought possible from a woman half my size.

"You really think this is gonna work?" she demands. "I know your big secret now in all its ugly detail, so you try to be as horrible as you can in the hopes that I won't ask more questions?"

"Still a naïve little girl, aren't you?" I ask menacingly. "I don't have to try to be horrible; I was born this way."

"Is that right?" she asks, refusing to let go of my hand. It would be so easy to shake her off, but I don't. "You were born horrible. No hope of redemption. Fucked from Day One. Is that all accurate?"

"A monster can only sire a monster."

She rolls her eyes. “Where’d you get that? Russian fortune cookie?”

“Who do you think raised me?” I demand.

“Is that what you’re calling what he did—‘raising you’?” she asks. “Because I’ve got news for you: Gregor Semenov didn’t raise you. He tried to build you, mold you, train you—but nothing about what he did was in the least bit paternal.”

“Call it what you like. The bottom line is—”

She pulls herself closer to me. “The bottom line is he didn’t succeed in building the perfect successor for his Bratva. Because if that were true, you’d have stood by and watched him beat the shit out of your mother.”

I almost flinch, but I manage to maintain my frozen composure. “I did. Many, many, many times. I stood by and watched as he hit her, terrorized her, brutalized her. I watched as, bit by bit, he broke her down. He stole her smile, killed her joy, and reduced her to a shell of a woman. A living ghost with nothing to offer and nothing to live for.”

She moves even closer. Now, she’s right in the curl of my arms, her chest pressing up against mine. So close that I can see the flecks of hazel in her green eyes. So close that I can see the tears forming in the corners of her eyes.

“Daniil, what happened between your mother and father... None of it was your fault.”

I grind my teeth. Jesus. She really is a naïve little girl. Gregor tried to teach me a long time ago that hope is the death of control. When you have hope, you stop seeing the reality of the world. You start chasing idealistic fantasies.

And most of them end up killing you.

“Are you so afraid of the truth?” I spit. “What’s the matter, princess: ashamed of the fact that you fucked a monster, so you’re trying to make me out to be a victim instead? I don’t need your sympathy.”

I expect her to pull back. I expect her to drop my arm. I expect anger and hatred—something, anything—that will allow me to

walk out of here feeling as though I'm back in control.

Yet she just holds in position, her grip soft but ever-present. "I'm not giving you sympathy," she says softly. "I can't give you absolution, either. Even if I wanted to. I can't save you, Daniil, and I'm not trying to. I just want you to know that I'm here."

She says the words so damn softly that I feel them creep into my body like a virus. Silent. Efficient. Completely capable of killing me.

"For now."

She does flinch at that, but I don't succeed in hurting her. Not enough to make her give up, anyway. Why the fuck is she choosing *this* moment to grow a thick skin?

"Yes, for now," she agrees. "Until you're forced to leave us and go fight your shadow war." There's no bitterness in her tone anymore. She speaks as though she's resigned herself to the inevitability of it. "You promised you'd come back, though."

"I will come back," I tell her. "For Isla."

That does it. Finally, a blow lands. Finally, I get what I've been trying to achieve since the moment I turned around and realized that she had been listening in on my conversation with Petro.

Hurt floods across her features, drowning out every other emotion for a moment. I feel a tiny, satisfied spark of achievement, before it shrivels up and sinks to that dark, deep place inside me where everything goes to die.

"At least you have something to fight for," she bites out, her voice cracking. "At least there's someone you love. And as much as you would like me to believe you're a monster, I'm not buying it anymore, Daniil." She squeezes my arm hard. "I know that you can't look me in the eye right now because you don't want me to see how deeply you feel. Monsters can't feel, can they? But *you* can. You do."

I grab her face. She gasps, the breath getting caught between her lips and my fury. My fingers crush both her cheeks as I

force her to look at me.

“There—I’m looking you in the eye,” I growl. “What do you see now, *sladkaya*?”

Her breath slides across my skin like a whisper. She smells of the forest. She smells of fresh water and rich earth. I can already sense the nightmares that scent is going to unleash on me later.

I know I must be hurting her. My fingertips are digging into the soft flesh of her cheeks, but she doesn’t give the slightest indication that she’s scared or in pain. She just looks at me with an expression that’s half tenderness and half bleeding heart.

“I see a broken man,” she chokes out. “But one who is still within reach of redemption. You are in the driver’s seat. All you have to do is reach out and take the wheel. Isn’t that right? Isn’t that what you told me?”

I let go of her in disgust—not with her, but with myself. She stumbles backward and rights herself against the wall.

I shove past her on my way out, refusing to stay in her presence any longer. I can already start to feel my barriers scream with the promise of eruption. It’s like someone has rigged them with bombs and they’re seconds away from going off.

I don’t want to be anywhere near her when they do.

Kinsley doesn’t say a word as I leave her behind. But I’m pretty sure I hear a sob escape her lips as the doors slide shut. I have to fight every instinct in my body not to turn back around and go to her. To kiss that sound off her lips.

You got what you wanted, you miserable bastard. You wanted to hurt her? Well, she’s hurt. Mission fucking accomplished.

I reach the earth and start walking in the direction of the hiking trails. I need some space. I need time to gain back the composure that she’s ripped away in a matter of minutes.

My mistake was that I underestimated her weapons of choice. I was expecting sarcasm, anger, moral superiority. What I got

instead was far deadlier and far more effective.

What I got instead was kindness.

DANIIL

I walk for a while to clear my head.

It doesn't work.

So I start to run.

That doesn't work, either.

So I go faster and faster and yet still the thoughts keep coming. Faster then. Harder. Dig deep. *Run.*

It's not until I'm sprinting so hard my heart is tattooing an imprint of itself against my rib cage that my mind finally begins to quiet down.

An hour of full-on sprinting later, every breath is a dagger in my side and my clothes are soaked through with sweat. I strip off my shirt and start the walk back to the cabin. It's about half an hour away, but I'm okay with that. I need more time.

Time to think.

Time to vent.

The trail loops around the waterfall, hugging its curves, breaking through the underbrush here and there to showcase jaw-dropping vistas of the valley beyond. Truth be told, though, I barely notice any of it. Five minutes after we leave this place, I'll have forgotten every last detail.

So why is it that the most inconsequential details from ten years ago are burned into me? I can remember every damn thing when it comes to Kinsley. I remember the sound of her gasp as she tried to fight the wedding dress that was pulling

her under. I remember the way the mascara and blood and sweat and tears had come together to form a crusty second skin across her face. I remember the way she wound her hands together as though she didn't know what to do with them.

I remember the way she moaned when I'd first pushed into her, how it sounded almost... grateful. Like she was holding a breath and she didn't know how to let it go without me there to coax it out of her.

She's taking up space in my brain. She's eating up valuable real estate that should be focused on other, more important matters.

Like how I'm going to kill my father.

"*Ty moy syn,*" he had had the gall to say to me the first and last time he had visited me in my cell. *You are my son.* "And that still means something."

"It means you won't kill me," I'd scoffed, "but you'll lock me up like a fucking animal. How heartwarmingly paternal."

He'd just shrugged, completely unfazed. "You can get out right now. You know what you have to do."

Yeah, I knew alright. *Bend.* And if I bent, I would spend the rest of my life bending in front of his throne again and again.

I knew something else, too: that which bends eventually breaks.

So no, Father, I will not bend. I wouldn't do it then and I won't do it now. You will bend. You will break. You will bleed.

And then you will be forgotten.

DANIIL

I'm almost back at the house when I hear something in the trees. I pause and step off the trail, through a wall of brush, then I emerge into a clearing. Kinsley is sitting there, slumped against a broad trunk, idly weaving a crown of daisies.

When she hears me, she stifles a gasp and sits upright. She stares up at me with foggy green eyes that match the moss clinging to the barks of all the trees we're surrounded by. Her cheeks are ruddy with color from the chilly air.

I step into the light, cross the glade, and sit next to her. "If you were making a break for it, you didn't get very far."

She rolls her eyes. "Isla's napping. I thought I'd explore a little bit. It's nice here."

I shrug. "If you say so."

"Oh, come on," she says. "Doesn't anything impress you?"

"Very little." *But you do, sladkaya. You've impressed me from the start.*

Kinsley sighs and leans back against the tree. "You've lost the ability to appreciate the little things in life. Who hurt you?" The moment the words escape her mouth, she draws in a sharp, guilty breath. "I—I'm sorry. I didn't mean—I was just joking and... ugh."

"Calm down. You don't need to treat me with kid gloves. We're not all as fragile as you."

I close my eyes and lie back on the velvety grass. It's cool and quiet and softly sunny here. As I breathe it all in, the claws locked around my heart unclench, ever so slightly.

Then I hear a little sigh. An exhale that blows the tension right out of the space between us. "I may be wound a little tight at the moment," she admits.

I open one eye and glance at her. "A little?"

"It's not like you make things easy for me. You freaked me out earlier," she says. "You ran out on me. When we were in the middle of a conversation."

"The conversation was over. And I needed some air."

"Well, I was worried."

"You don't have to worry about me."

"The hell I don't. You were clearly upset, and you... you looked like you were... coming undone."

She's not wrong. "Coming undone" is exactly how she makes me feel most of the time. "And you want to put me back together again, is that right?"

I expect her to deny it. To get to defensive, the way she usually does. Tell me to go screw myself or call me an asshole. I'm prepared for all those reactions.

"Would that be so horrible?" she asks softly.

I take it back: I was not prepared for that.

So I just stare at her, and she stares right back. The silence between us grows loud with all the things we're not saying to each other. But I'm guessing that if I can feel them, she can, too.

"What about me makes you so sure that I'm worth saving?" I rasp.

She opens her mouth, but I can see her tongue twist as she changes her answer at the last moment. "You're... Isla's father."

What had she been about to say? Why do I want to know so bad?

“And I’m going to do right by her,” I grit out. “That’s all that matters.”

“I’m not sure about that.”

“Which part?”

She cocks her head to the side. “The part about it not mattering. I know you’re going to do right by her, Daniil. I was convinced of that from the first moment I saw the two of you together. But you said it yourself: you’re broken.”

I shake my head and sit up. “Still repeating old mistakes, I see. You couldn’t fix your parents. You couldn’t fix Tom. What makes you think you can fix me?”

She cringes back, drawing her knees up to her chest. “That was—those things were different.”

“I’d love to hear how,” I drawl.

“Tom and I didn’t—you know what? It doesn’t matter. Rehashing the past won’t change it. I just want... I want us to be okay.”

I sigh and prop myself up on her elbows. She looks good out here in the wilderness like this. Small and fragile, yes, but mighty nonetheless. The glow of her eyes and the flush of her skin, the swoop of her collarbone, the waterfall of her hair—it’s all beautiful in a way I didn’t think anything would ever appear to be ever again.

For ten years, I’ve thought my world was ugly through and through.

I was wrong.

“I am okay, *sladkaya*,” I murmur. “Always have been.”

“Even when your father was hurting your mother?”

I pretend as though the visual that pulls up doesn’t bother me any longer. “Yes.”

“Even when your father was hurting you?”

“Even then.”

She looks dissatisfied with my answers. But maybe what she’s really unhappy with is the dishonesty in all of them. She can sense it, which means my greatest nightmare has just been realized.

She’s too close. Much too close.

“I don’t believe you.”

I shrug. “Your prerogative.”

“Is it so hard for you to have one honest conversation with me?” she presses.

“You want honesty?” I ask. “Fine. I can give you honesty.” I push myself upright and fix her with a cold glare. “I made one friend the whole time I was in jail. A man in the next cell over. He was poor and uneducated and never got the medical help he needed, so he was slow to speak and slower to understand. In all the time I was jailed next to him, he never had a single visitor.”

My voice softens as I remember him. That hunchback posture, the shuffling gait. His fingers were nimble, though. He liked carving birdhouses, I recall. He’d do the same design again and again and again. Hundreds of them filling the prison carpentry shop, each identical to the last. And whenever anyone asked about them, he’d say there was a cardinal that used to visit his window every morning when he was a boy growing up in the countryside. He loved that bird.

“I told you about my father visiting me. He thought I’d break quickly once he had me caged like an animal. But I defied him. A month or so later, a guard shoved a note through the slot in my door. It said four words: *Kill the bird man*. I didn’t have to ask to know who it was from.”

Kinsley’s expression scrunches up a little. She can sense what’s coming. The horror of it.

She doesn’t say a word, though. It’s like the air between us has stilled and the dust is circulating in slow motion between our bodies. She just looks at me for a long time, trying to guess at

the past as deeply as she's trying to hope for the outcome she wants.

"You didn't do it?"

"Is that your answer, or a question?"

She sighs. "You didn't do it."

"Final answer?"

She nods hesitantly. "You're too stubborn to bend for someone who's trying to force you into submission."

I grit my teeth. I can almost taste blood. "A week passed. The prison shop kept filling with birdboxes. Then came the fight that landed me in solitary. Another twenty-four hours later, and I received a package from my father. It looked like a present."

I stop short, wondering if she's strong enough to hear this. Everyone demands the truth, but the truth is always so much more attractive in theory than it is in reality. Real truths are rusted and bloody and sharp.

I close my eyes and relive the memory of opening that lid. "I found fingers inside the box," I whisper. "Her diamond ring was still in place. Just so that I would know who they belonged to."

I glance at Kinsley and notice that she has tears in her eyes. I resist the urge to brush them away.

"Whose...? Was it...?"

I nod. "My mother's."

She breathes out in a gust so strong, her breath stampedes against my face. I want to pull her into my arms and have her do that again, just so I can drown myself in her.

"He... he killed his own wife."

"*Ona ne byla krov'yu.* She was not blood," I repeat again in English. "She was just the woman he married to sire an heir. Once he got me, she ceased to be anything other than an encumbrance."

"Daniil—"

“The point of my story is this,” I say, cutting her off before she can say something sweet and comforting and so completely, naively Kinsley. “I spent over a year in prison. I broke out of there. I built my own Bratva from nothing. I openly defied my father. And I caused the death of my mother.”

“Daniil—”

I hold up my hand and she falls silent. The way that Gregor always wished I would when he did the same to me. “And through all of those horrors in my life, I was okay. You’re trying to find the humanity inside me, Kinsley. Stop it. There is none to find.”

“I don’t give up so easily,” she whispers. “No matter how hard you try to make me.”

KINSLEY

I want to stay here forever.

Just him and me, lying in a puddle of sunlight. Sparring back and forth, sure, but it's not quite fighting. More like... foreplay, I guess you could call it. I can feel the edges of our conversation spike at odd moments. When he gets a little defensive or I get a little emotional.

But it never breaks into a fight.

Maybe because the sun feels too good against our skin. Maybe because we can hear the birdsong skittering over to us from between the trees.

Maybe because there's something at the end of this long road we've been on, and maybe that something is forgiveness.

Of course that might just be the naivete talking. He's already used the word on me more times than I can count. It hurt the first time. The second, too, and the third and the fourth. But it's stopped hurting, and I think I know why.

Because if naivete and hope go hand in hand, then I don't want to let go of either one.

The story about his mother's death was difficult, to say the least. It made my heart cringe to hear what he was forced to go through. All I wanted in that moment was to slide closer to him, put my hands on his knees, pull my body into the circle of his and hold him for as long as he would let me.

I know better than to try that, though.

Which is why I'm still sitting in my patch of sunlight, and he's still sitting in his.

"We should go back," Daniil says after a long time has passed.

I don't want to go back, but I nod anyway. "You're probably right."

He gets to his feet and offers me his hand. I slip my fingers into his and he pulls me upright. He doesn't let go of me immediately, though. Instead, our hands fall to our sides, but they're still interlinked.

The air between us charges up until it's alive and crackling. The birdsong quiets. For a second, I think he's about to kiss me. It feels like it might be the kind of kiss that has the power to change things for good, if only one or the other or both of us will stop being so stubborn that we stop it from happening.

Then he blinks, or maybe I do, and the electricity dissipates. The birds start singing again. Just like that, the moment is gone.

But the feeling remains.

The feeling that we might make it to the other side of whatever this thing is after all.

DANIIL

It's late when I slip into her room. "Kinsley," I whisper into her sleeping ear. "Get up."

She mumbles and fusses and moans, a sound that zaps straight to that low part of my gut that she makes come alive with the simplest little noises.

"Get up," I whisper again. I hold out her clothes and help her into them. She's like a living doll, pliable, compliant, easy to maneuver.

When she's dressed, I take her hand and guide her to the door. I peek into Isla's room as we pass to make sure she's okay. The sound of her melodic breathing is music to my ears.

"Daniil..." mumbles Kinsley as we step out into the brisk night. She's a slow waker, especially in the middle of the night like this. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

She's quiet as we make our way down the spindly rocks that line the path down the cliff, retracing my steps from earlier with Isla, though when we reach a fork in the trail, I veer in a new direction, toward the mouth of the river.

I keep an iron grip on her the whole time. I'll die before I let her fall.

The lower down we get, the louder the sound of the rushing water becomes. The moonlight catches the mica in the rocks and the surface of the water, so that everything looks like it's glowing.

Then we round a corner and reach the waterfall.

At the sight of it, Kinsley pauses. She stands by the river and closes her eyes for a second. Mist floats up from where the waterfall crashes against the rocks of the riverbed. It sprays over our faces, fine and cold like melting needles.

She looks at me and opens her eyes, waiting. “Why did you bring me here, Daniil?”

I breathe in the cold air. “I just wanted to show you something beautiful,” I rasp. “Or, fuck, maybe I wanted to show myself. To prove to myself that the world isn’t as ugly as I’ve always thought it was.”

Kinsley nods, saying nothing for a long time. The river rushes and rushes. It’s calming. I need this, especially now, because this woman and her daughter—*our* daughter—have tugged and sliced and yanked at the stitches that keep me together. I feel like I’m starting to fall to fucking pieces the longer I spend with them.

Her voice punctures the quiet. “You know, the last time I was at a waterfall, I was twelve. It’s one of the only nice memories I have of my father.”

She doesn’t talk much about her father. I’ve heard a few stories about her mother now, but he’s always been the villain there. There’s been nothing to suggest that he was anything other than a one-dimensional scumbag. Worthless in every sense of the word.

I sit down on the soft moss by the river, far enough away so that we’re not being constantly pelted by water droplets. “Tell me.”

She drops down to her knees beside me. Her dress fans out over her legs and a soft breeze toys with the ends of her hair. “I had this class trip coming up. An end of the year thing. We needed a signed permission slip from our parents, and a hundred dollars.” She picks at the hem of her dress. “The permission slip was easy enough to get. But the hundred dollars... not so much.”

“I’m guessing he said no.”

She glances at me with a sad, inward-facing smile. “He said he didn’t have extra money to waste on nonsense. So I came up with a plan. I told him that I would raise the money for the trip myself and my dad agreed to let me go if I did. In hindsight, I realized that he only agreed because he thought I’d never be able to make it happen.”

“But you did.”

She smiles. A happier smile this time. “I did. I cleaned houses, babysat, tutored. I took extra shifts at the ice cream parlor where I worked. At the end of those few weeks, I had three times the amount I needed. I was so proud—so *stinking* proud of myself—when I brought that jar of money home and shoved it in his face. ‘Look, Dad! I did it. I told you I could do it.’ Mom wasn’t there, of course. She’d spent the entire weekend locked in her room, waiting for the newest bruise on her face to heal.”

I swallow hard. “What did he say?”

“He was mostly just shocked to see all that money in one place. In those days, money disappeared as fast as it came into our house. So he just kinda grunted at me and that was it. I went to sleep the happiest girl in the world. The next morning, I woke up—and my money jar was gone.”

I fist a chunk of fallen granite angrily, even as the edges cut into my skin. It’s been more than a decade since the events she’s describing, but they make me as furious as if I’m watching them now.

What does that mean, for someone else’s pain to feel like your own? For someone else’s scars to burn on you every bit as badly as they burned on them?

I don’t know. I don’t have any answers anymore.

“He took your money,” I growl.

She nods. “He hadn’t even left me the hundred I needed for my trip. He’d taken everything. Every last penny. I spent the whole morning walking from bar to bar trying to find him. When I finally did, he was passed out in an alley. I woke him up and demanded he give me back my hundred dollars. I told

him I wasn't asking for the rest of it. I just wanted to go on the trip. He just stared at me."

Her voice is deadened, numb. Maybe this hurt her once upon a time. But as the years passed, the pain faded, leaving the exact opposite of pain in its place. Like when you poke a bruise for so long that it stops hurting and simply begins to feel like it belongs to someone else.

I used to think that meant you'd overcome whatever hurt you in the first place.

These days, I think differently.

"I'm trying to figure out how this story is attached to your one nice memory of your father."

She smiles. "I'm getting there. He found me the next day in my room. He didn't say much. He just told me to get dressed, that we were going out. So I did. He'd never taken me anywhere before. Not voluntarily, at least. I figured he was going to drop me off somewhere and drive off. I even packed a loaf of bread just to be safe. Like a Hansel and Gretel thing."

"A what?"

"Never mind," she mumbles, blushing. "Anyway, we drove for a long time and when I told him I was hungry, he stopped at a diner and told me I could buy whatever I wanted. I tested that theory by ordering a burger with curly fries, a side of potato wedges and a giant chocolate shake. Normally, he'd throw a fit about me getting that much food. But he just sat there and watched me eat. He didn't order anything himself. When I was stuffed, we got back in his shitty old truck and kept driving. I still wasn't sure this wasn't some trap. But then we got to the waterfall. 'Get in,' he told me. 'Go play.' He sat on the hood of his jeep while I swam in the river. We only left because it started to get dark. He didn't say a word to me as we drove home. We just got back, I went to bed, and that was that. Never talked about it again."

I raise my eyebrows. "That was that?"

"It was his way of apologizing to me, I suppose. Making amends."

“A drive to a waterfall and some fast food?” I scoff. “That’s all it took?”

She shrugs. “It was a big deal. To me. Shoot, I dunno,” she says, her shoulders slumping a little. “I guess at the time it felt like... proof. Proof that maybe, deep down, he cared about me. Just a little bit.”

I try not to look as enraged as I feel. But fuck if I’m not furious at the bastard who gave Kinsley so little that something as simple as a burger and a road trip could make her happy. Like that could fix the damage he’d spent a lifetime doing to her.

“You deserved better.”

She glances at me. “So did you.”

“Your sympathy is wasted on me.”

She tilts her head to the side in that way she does when she thinks she’s seeing something in me I haven’t been willing to reveal before. Her hand finds my knee and strokes there. It’s overly familiar, entirely too intimate. But there’s something reckless in her eyes tonight.

“The point is, I like waterfalls,” she says. “They feel like forgiveness.”

The only thing I can do is stare at her. This woman is a fucking marvel. I wonder if she realizes just how much she’s changed me.

I wonder also if it’s the kind of change that a man like me—a man in my position, with my scars, with my responsibilities—can survive.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” she asks softly.

“Like what?”

“Like you’re reliving an old memory.”

“What if I am?”

“The only old memory you have of me is one I’d really, really rather forget.” I raise my eyebrows and she sighs. “That was

me at my worst, Daniil. I was scared and alone and I was running from mistakes I told myself I'd never make."

"At least you had the sense to run from them."

"I should never have made them in the first place." She gets quiet for a moment, her eyes growing starry as she stares up at the starless sky. "I was trying to save Tom. I guess I was repeating my mother's cycle in the hope that I could fix it. Like you said."

"You can't change the past," I rasp.

I would know. I've tried.

"I get that. In my head, at least. Maybe not in my heart. But back then, I didn't want to admit it to any part of myself. I'm not stupid, though; I saw the signs with Tom. There were plenty of them. Whenever Emma pointed out little red flags, I'd laugh it off. Or I'd justify it. I did that until Emma stopped pointing them out because she was afraid she would lose me if she kept doing it. But she didn't have to point anything out. I saw them myself. The little controlling behaviors. The temper. The entitlement. He wasn't a carbon copy of my father or anything, but he was close enough in all the ways that mattered. He was a man who would hit a woman and justify the behavior. He was a man who would hurt a woman and blame her for provoking him."

For a moment, it's like she knows.

For a moment, she looks at me and the glitter in her eyes is nothing but accusation, forcing me to face the sins I tried to pretend I didn't have.

But everyone has skeletons in their closets.

Especially monsters like me.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

I blink and Kinsley's face comes back into focus. "What?"

"I didn't mean to bring the mood down. I just realized that all the stories I've ever told you are sad ones. It's not all sad, you know," she insists. "Having Isla was pretty much the highlight, and things were better from there."

I search for it again, but there's no accusation in her eyes. I must've imagined it in the first place. Because Kinsley's not that kind of woman. She's the kind of woman who looks at a monster and sees not a beast, but a victim. The kind of woman who looks at a man and sees not a killer, but the boy he used to be.

She gets up to her feet suddenly, and I notice once again that wild, reckless expression gleaming in her eyes. She reaches behind her and pulls down the zip at the back of her dress.

“What are you doing?”

She glances down at me, but she doesn't stop stripping. “What does it look like I'm doing?” she asks with the twinkle of a laugh in her voice. “I'm going in for a dip.”

I raise my eyebrows. “It's going to be cold.”

She shrugs. “I'm kinda looking forward to it. What's that thing you said the other night? *'The cold is how you know you're alive'*?”

She pulls down her dress. Her nipples are hard little nubs, pale pink in the moonlight. I just watch her, wondering what the hell has come over her. Thanking my lucky stars that whatever it is, it's happening in my presence.

Once her dress is bunched up on the grass, she turns towards the water. Her perfect peach of an ass stares me in the face, turning my semi into a raging hard-on.

An incredible feat, considering that it is really goddamn cold out.

“You're really doing this?” I ask.

“Don't be a wuss, Daniil.”

“What did you just call me?”

“Did I stutter?”

I shake my head in disbelief. “In my entire life, no one has ever used that word on me before. Ever.”

She laughs. Giggles, is more like. There are goosebumps coating every inch of her body, but from the beatific

expression on her face, you'd think she was stepping into a sauna.

"I dare you not to be one," she says—right before she jumps right into the water.

Her delighted scream pierces the air, breaking it like winter's last ice cracking on the first morning of spring.

"Oh my God!" she exclaims. "Fuck, shit, heaven, and hell! It's really freaking cold."

"No shit," I say, getting to my feet and reaching for the buttons of my shirt. I pull it off, and my pants quickly follow. I only keep my boxers on to hide my raging erection. Then I dive in.

She's right—it is freezing cold. Which just proves that this woman is batshit crazy.

But she's my kind of crazy.

I grab hold of her and pull her behind one of the big rocks in the center of the river that break the flow. It's considerably calmer over here, although Kinsley's jaw is chattering a million miles an hour now.

"W-what the h-hell was I th-thinking-g?"

"I'm the wrong man to ask."

"I don't know about that," she says, wrapping her arms around my neck. Despite the numbing cold, I can still feel the softness of her breasts brush up against my chest. "You seem to know me pretty well."

"You're not the enigma you think you are," I tease.

"Maybe not. But no one else has bothered to look too deeply at the real me."

That doesn't make a lick of sense to me. All I think when I look at this woman is about how deep I want to go. No pun intended. Okay, pun slightly intended.

Her fingers tickle the back of my shoulders. It's a deep contrast against the cold rush of water. We're treading dangerous territory here and she knows it.

I'm not sure she's thinking straight tonight. A better man
wouldn't take advantage.

But as I've told her repeatedly, I'm not a better man.

I'm *her* man.

KINSLEY

No good can come of this.

But there's something about tonight. *It's the magic of waterfalls*, I think to myself irrationally as I comb my fingers through his dark hair. It's spiked at odd angles with water droplets hanging off each strand like diamonds.

"The water's getting warmer," I say, too self-conscious to let the silence linger.

"No, it's not. Your body's just adjusting."

"People are good at that, aren't they?" I muse. "Adjusting."

"Waterfalls make you philosophical, I see."

I smile, drawing myself even closer to him without really thinking about it. It's my body taking control again, clinging to his warmth, his aura. His blue irises are hypnotic. He shouldn't be allowed to look anyone in the eye. It gives him an unfair advantage, and he already has far too many of those.

"Can I ask you a weird question?" My teeth have finally stopped clacking like together like flamenco castanets.

"I've come to expect that of you at this point," Daniil drawls.

I grin. "Were you ever afraid of water? Like, when you were about three or four, did you ever go through a phase where you were scared of water?"

"If I did, I can't remember."

“Hm. What about grass—did you go through a phase when you didn’t like stepping on grass?”

“I’m confused by these questions.”

I readjust my grip on him. “When Isla was little,” I explain, “she went through all these strange phases. I used to wonder if she got certain things from you. Some deep-seated biological connection that made her behave the way she did.”

“She was afraid of the water? And grass?”

“She hated washing her hair,” I clarify. “She’d kick and scream and tell me she hated water. The grass wasn’t really a fear, exactly. She just didn’t like stepping in it. If there was grass, she’d find a path to walk on. And if there wasn’t a path, I’d have to carry her.”

He barks out a laugh that feels a little too harsh. “No, *sladkaya*. I walked my own paths.” He pauses and looks at me. “I did... I did draw, though. For a little while.”

He says it tentatively, almost shamefully, maybe even regretfully. I stare at him with wide eyes. “You did?”

He nods, his fingers curling around my waist. “I suppose that was my phase. I filled half a sketchbook before it was taken from me. There ended my short stint as an artist. I haven’t looked or thought about drawing since then. It’s not worth mentioning.”

“What do you mean, your sketchbook was taken from you?”

“My father discovered me in the garden one day drawing,” he says. His eyes are heavy, somber, but his tone conveys no emotion. “He looked through the book, then he marched me into the living room. It was the height of summer, but he made the maids light the fireplace anyway. Then he made me watch as he fed the flames with my drawings. Every single one of them. One page at a time.”

I stare at him in horror, my fingers sliding up the sides of his face to give reassurance that’s twenty or thirty years too late. “H-he burned them all? But why?”

“Do monsters need reasons for what they do?”

“Everyone has reasons for doing what they do,” I say with conviction. “Whether they know it or not.”

“I suppose that’s true,” Daniil says grudgingly. “He didn’t want me frittering my life away on stupid feminine pursuits. I believe that was his reasoning, more or less.”

“That’s horrible.”

He shrugs. “My father was right,” he says sharply, as though he wants to erase the softness of the previous moments. “It was a stupid thing to waste my time on.”

My eyes narrow defensively. “Do you think that Isla is wasting her time then?”

“It’s different for Isla.”

“Why?” I demand. “Because she’s a girl?”

“Because she doesn’t have the fate of the Bratva resting on her shoulders. I did.”

I freeze. We’ve never really discussed his Bratva in direct relation to Isla. “She... she doesn’t, right? I mean, she won’t... she won’t be...”

He looks at me with an amused expression. “Are you relieved that she might not be able to take over after me, or angry that her gender takes her out of the running?”

“Neither.” I bite my bottom lip. “Well, maybe a little of both.”

He smirks. “Isla is my heir,” he says firmly. “But the burden of taking over after me is not hers to bear.”

I try not to be too obviously relieved. “Why not?”

“Because I’ve decided it isn’t,” he growls. “When she’s of age, she’ll be able to make the decision herself. If she wants to be a don, she can be. If she wants to be an artist, she can be. If she wants to be a spy or a waitress or a fucking circus clown, she can be. I will not stand in her way.”

I stare at the fierce confidence burning in his eyes. The cold isn’t so cold when Daniil looks like this. He really does mean it. Because unlike his father, or my father, his love for Isla isn’t transactional.

It's real.

I think about how I can convey to Daniil how much that means to me. I go through a dozen different versions of 'thank you' in my head, but none of them seem deep or strong enough to convey the depth of my feeling.

So I just kiss him instead.

And when my lips fall against his, flush and wanting, it feels like the only way to explain to him what it means to me that he would put Isla ahead of his ambition, his legacy.

He doesn't kiss me back right away, but I can feel his body respond to mine. His arms tighten around my waist and his erection against my thigh is undeniable. My hands are still curled around his jaw, and they slide up his face as the kiss deepens. This is the only warmth I need, and it feels much too good to end.

But he does end it. Abruptly. His eyes are alert and filled with concentration that I don't immediately register. "Daniil, what's wrong?"

"Someone's coming. Or something, maybe."

"What?" I balk. "What kind of something?"

And that's when I hear it. The sound of something snorting and snuffling along the path we climbed down to get here. It sounds big. Rocks skitter down the hill and leaves crunch under its feet.

I'm paralyzed with cold and fear. But Daniil isn't. If he's ever been dumbstruck a day in his life, I can't possibly picture it.

"Come on," he says, moving towards the edge of the river and pulling me with him.

He leaps out of the water and tows me up after him. We dress hurriedly in the dark. My teeth are chattering again, worse than before, and my fingers won't work right to pull up the zipper on the dress or fasten the buttons.

Above us, the sound of the animal or whatever it is grows louder. Closer.

“Stay with me, Kinsley,” Daniil breathes in my ear. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Then he takes my hand, and we run.



The moment we get back into our cabin is sweet relief. That’s all I can register. The heater is on, so everything from the spiced air to the warm rock floors have a toasty heat that siphons the chill from my bones.

We both make a beeline for the bathroom, pulling off clothes with the same fervor with which we’d pulled them on. I don’t bother stripping off my thong before I step into the shower and moan against the beat of hot water on my skin.

“Oh God,” I moan as I sink to the floor and curl my knees up against my chest, eyes closed. “God, that feels good.”

It takes me several more minutes before I’m warm enough to think coherently again. When I open my eyes, I expect to see Daniil.

But he’s nowhere in sight.

“Daniil?” I whisper as loud as I dare without waking Isla, but he doesn’t answer.

I turn the water off, run a towel over my body, and pull on one of the bathrobes hanging on the wall. I find Daniil on the balcony, bare-chested but showing no sign that he feels the cold.

“Feel better?” he asks casually when I step out, as though we hadn’t just kissed in the middle of a freezing river right under the mouth of a waterfall and then ran from a bear or Bigfoot or something in between.

“More or less.”

“Good.” He falls silent.

Oh, so that’s what we’re doing? Pretending like all of that never happened? I suppose I could get on board with that, if it

weren't for the fact that my heart feels like it's about to jump right out of my chest.

Don't address it, Kinz. Just ignore it. He doesn't want you and that's okay, that's for the best, that's—

“Daniil.”

Stop it! Stop it right now.

He turns his eyes on me. Says nothing.

“About the kiss...” His eyes find mine and just like that, I have no fucking clue what I was about to say. “Let's just... forget it ever happened. I think that's—”

“Whatever you want, Kinsley. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

I linger. *Please ask me to stay out here with you, I beg him silently. Please don't push me away.*

He doesn't smile. His eyes look far away, contemplating a future I have no part in. I hate that I don't know exactly what he's thinking. I hate that I can't determine if that kiss meant as much to him as it did to me.

If he asks me to stay, it means he cares. That's all I want. Just proof that he cares. That he's capable of caring.

But then a cloud passes over the moon, and everything goes dark, and still, Daniil says nothing.

I retreat inside and go to sleep.

Alone.

KINSLEY

“What is wrong with you?” I mutter to myself.

I’ve been pacing for the last thirty minutes, since the moment I said goodnight to Daniil, walked into the bedroom, and shut the door.

Finally spent, I collapse onto the bed, face first. I wish Emma was here. Or, if not that, then I wish I could call her so that I could try and talk through my convoluted feelings.

This is probably the longest we’ve ever gone without talking. It feels weird. Like I lost my pinky finger ages ago, but I’m only just now realizing how crucial that little digit is to my life. I’m off-balance without it.

I roll over onto my back and gaze up. The dark ceiling stares back at me, offering me nothing but ice-cold silence.

But I’ve had my fill of the cold today.

It doesn’t take me long to figure out that I’m not going to be able to fall asleep. Not anytime soon. Not when I know he’s out there, my kiss still fresh on his lips.

My *unfinished* kiss on his lips, rather.

It makes me wonder: did he break the kiss just because fate sent a bear to ruin what could’ve been a special moment? Or would he have pulled back anyway? I don’t know why I need to know—it’s not like it would change anything. Either story ends with a broken kiss and a lonely night.

But I do want to know. I just do.

I lie there for another few minutes, trying to imagine what Emma would say if she were here.

You have feelings for him, you idiot. So go out there and tell him.

You have a chance at a real family. So why not go for it?

Don't be so scared of getting hurt. They wouldn't call it "falling in love" if it was safe and easy. They wouldn't call it a leap of faith if you could stay on your own two feet while you do it.

But even my best impressions of Emma came up short. I can't be sure if that's what she would really say, or if maybe that's what I need her to say and I'm just putting the words I want to hear in her imaginary mouth.

I push myself upright. My body is moving even while my mind starts to stutter and protest. *What are you doing?* it's asking me. *Where are you going? Now, hold on just a damn sec—*

But I'm up. I'm on my feet. Stupid? Yeah. Dangerous? Probably. Naïve? Without a doubt.

I keep going anyway.

Daniil is still on the balcony, but he's moved from the hammock to the sofa. He's got his legs hitched up over the balcony railing and he's looking directly up at the stars like there are things written there that only he can see. The night is clear and crisp and the sky looks diamond-encrusted.

"Wow," I whisper. "That is something."

He doesn't startle like some people would. He doesn't look at me, either, or even so much as blink. I just become aware that he's become aware of me. Simple as that.

"I couldn't sleep," I explain, stepping onto the balcony.

He still says nothing. It feels like I'm walking a pirate's plank as I glide over and sit down next to him. Farther away than I want to, but it's as close as my courage permits. Does he know why I'm here, I wonder? Is there guilt stamped across my

forehead, along with evidence of every other bad decision I've made in the last fifteen years?

I'm fidgeting and itchy, about ready to crawl out of my skin, when he finally breaks the silence.

"What are you doing out here, *sladkaya*?" he asks. His voice is soft and yet somehow deadly at the same time.

"I, um... I don't exactly know."

"Bullshit." One word, succinct and whiplash-effective.

"I was kinda hoping you could explain something to me." I breathe in and charge ahead. "Why did you stop?"

I cringe and close my eyes as soon as the words are out. They sound even lamer than I expected.

Daniil sighs and rubs his chin with those capable fingers. "You're overthinking things."

"I've been known to do that."

"So maybe you should stop."

"Ah, if only I could."

He looks like he's about to smile. I can feel my heart skip around at the mere prospect of seeing him do just that.

Jesus, I'm pathetic. And I'm terrified that he knows it.

"I thought you didn't want to cross that line with me anymore," he rumbles.

"I didn't. I mean—I don't."

"You're the one who kissed me," he adds. *As if I needed the reminder.* "I'll ask again: why are you here?"

"I want to finish that kiss," I say before I can lose my nerve.

He raises his eyebrows. Then, after what feels like an interminable length of time, he offers me his hand. I slip my fingers into his. The moment I do, he pulls me onto his lap.

My robe parts at the waist, revealing that I'm naked underneath. He plays with the tie of the robe, but he doesn't

pull it apart. His fingertips graze from the sash to my bare thighs. Ten points of heat that light me up from head to toe.

“You want to finish the kiss?” he asks in that gravelly voice. “Okay then. Finish it.”

I place my hands at his shoulders and lean in hungrily. His lips are firm and cold. They push against mine, and I realize that the last time, he’d been holding back.

He’s not holding back any longer, though. There’s nothing gentle about the way his lips attack mine, parting them easily with only the slightest of nudges.

The moment our tongues lash around one another, I feel my core shiver to life. It sends an electric bolt of desire coursing through my body. I’m leaning in, grinding against him, desperate for more friction...

When he pulls away.

He’s wearing this look on his face. It’s almost predatory. Wild, but in the kind of way that makes my toes curl with anticipation.

“Wha... what’s—?”

“You wanted a kiss,” he says, his words nearly a growl. “You got it. Now, go to bed. Before you get yourself into the kind of trouble you don’t want.”

“What kind of trouble is that?” I ask, sounding much bolder than I feel.

He peels my hands from around his neck. “If we keep kissing, I won’t be able to stop. That kind of trouble.”

I swallow. Those words *do* things to me. I heat up, open up, melt right on his lap.

“You know,” I say through a dry throat, “if you were really the asshole you pretend to be, you wouldn’t have given me the out. You would’ve just had your way with me and called it a night.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “I’d have a better explanation if you didn’t insist on doing that with your hips.”

I smirk and roll my hips against him again. “That, you mean?”
“Kinsley...”

It’s a reprimand, in theory. A red flag warning. But the sensible part of my brain shut down about five minutes ago. Scratch that—ten years ago. The animal side of my brain is in charge now, and it’s restless.

I lean in, brush my lips against his ear, and whisper, “You want me to stop? Make me.”

His eyes narrow even further. Before he can make good on his promise to send me packing, I get off his lap. I notice the disappointment in his eyes and it gives me the courage I need to go ahead with my impromptu plan.

It’s funny: I’ve never really seduced a man before, in the true sense of the word. And here I am, trying to seduce the father of my child. The man who left me in the middle of a deserted forest, after one night of amazing car sex, without so much as a *see-you-later*.

I pull at the sash of my robe and it comes apart immediately. I slide it off my shoulders and toss it carelessly to the floor. His eyes are alight with naked desire, snaking along my body with zealous concentration. Like missing even one freckle, one pocket of shadow, will be the death of him.

I lower myself down to my knees and run my hands along his legs. Up and down, up and down, until I see the resistance in his eyes finally sputter out.

That’s when I grab the waistband of his boxers and pull them down. His cock springs free and my mouth fills up with saliva instantly.

I wrap my right hand around the base of his cock and run my tongue along his shaft. “Fuck,” he mutters as he slips lower along the sofa, his legs parting a little wider.

I nestle into the crook of his thighs and keep exploring him with my tongue.

Tomorrow, this might feel like the mistake he seems to think it is. But tomorrows are for regret and logic and facing all the

annoying little things that hold you back from doing what you really want to do.

Tonights are for doing what you want.

He lets me do what I want, to my surprise. He doesn't direct me in any way. He doesn't push my head down like Tom used to do or grind into my mouth in search of his own selfish relief. He just sits there, letting me taste and savor him the way I want, as if he has no preferences apart from *my* lips, *my* tongue, *my* own pleasure.

It just makes me more determined. More desperate to satisfy him.

Only when my eyes turn watery do I pull out, allowing myself a moment to breathe. I'm gasping in big spurts of air, and it's cold and sharp in my lungs, but it feels good. Primal, sort of. We're just two animals touching each other on a cold night to keep the wild darkness at bay.

I look up at Daniil. He's looking back down at me. The beast in his eyes is alive and well. That does things to me, too, just like his words did.

"Come here, princess," he growls, pulling my back onto his lap.

I don't even have to try—he slides inside me like we were sculpted for one another. He fills me up in one deep thrust. All I can do is cling to his shoulders, murmuring nonsense syllables.

I start riding him slowly, trying to catch my breath, but at the same time, desperate to make him lose his.

Sex is a different experience this time around. I look into his eyes and I see more than the stoic killer who pulled me out of that river under the bridge. I see more than the cold don who walked back into my life like he had a right to be in it. I see more than just the man I'd spent a decade fantasizing about.

I see the broken boy. The disappointed son. The fierce protector.

The one trying to save everything he's already lost.

I see my own pain inside of his. He came back into my life because of dumb luck, or because of blind coincidence, or because of a puppet master called fate that thinks it's funny to ram polar opposites into each other's lives like spiritual bumper cars. But he came back, and now that he's here, all I can feel or hope for is what he promised to Isla.

An adventure, he called it. The tiny sliver of a chance for a happily-ever-after.

I never used to believe such a thing was possible. Since the day I ran down the steps of that chapel, crying and bleeding, I thought I'd left happily-ever-afters in the rearview.

Now, I'm not so sure.

I'm still not hopeful enough to truly believe that this one night will change anything. But I *am* hopeful enough to leave room for that to happen, just in case.

And if that makes me naïve...

I think I'm finally okay with that.

DANIIL

I sneak out while Kinsley is still sleeping.

I leave her spread across the bed, looking like a Vitruvian angel with a messy halo of hair. She's probably going to wake up wondering where I am. I wanted so badly to stay there with her. To stare at her, hold her, feel her warmth, smell her sweetness.

But a text came in the middle of the night.

Our fake IDs are ready. Which means I am officially out of time. No more hiding in the mountains and playing make-believe with my daughter and her mother. No more pretending that I'm anything other than what I've always been: a killer, and the son of a killer, without any hope of redemption for my sins.

Petro sent a pin for a meetup point. I walked there under cover of darkness, and now, I've been waiting almost twenty minutes for that dipshit, but he still hasn't shown up. This stretch of road is wide, flanked by rolling pastures that seem to stretch on into infinity.

I turn at the sound of an approaching vehicle. It's a beat-up old Camaro gunning its way up the road towards me. I'm skeptical that it's Petro—he's never been a fan of muscle cars; "too ostentatious," he always says, "whereas I'm more of a subtle type of cool"—until he pulls to a stop and grins at me.

His smile is all wrong, though. On closer inspection, his whole face is all wrong.

He's got a devil of a shiner and his nose is definitely not pointed at the same angle it was when I last saw him. He gets out of the car, slams the door, and runs at me like a puppy who's seeing his owner after a couple of weeks away.

"Buddy!" He slams into me and gives my back two solid thumps. "Didja miss me?"

"Get off me."

He makes sure to hang on tight for another five seconds before he finally releases me. "Missed those hugs. You really put your whole heart into them. Makes a guy feel loved."

"I don't know why I thought having your face rearranged would change your mood."

Petro looks aghast at the mere suggestion. "And let those assholes win? Fuck that."

I can't help but squint at his injuries. They look worse than he described them over the phone. "Did I mention he's going to pay for this?"

"You did," Petro says. "And I appreciate that. But let's be real: this was never about hurting me. In his eyes, I'm only an extension of you."

"Petro—"

"No, I'm serious. I'm your right hand, yes, and we all know I can toot my own horn with the best of 'em. But he just wanted to put his hands on you, *sobrat*. He couldn't, so he put his hands on me instead. Metaphorically speaking."

I grimace and change the subject. "You have the IDs?"

Petro pulls out the package from his jacket pocket and hands it to me. I tear it open and cast a critical eye over them. I've been using the same forger for the past seven years. Gustaf's work has always been impeccable, and he knows how to keep his mouth shut.

"Good. These will check out." I notice him shifting in place like a little kid who needs to pee. It's a telltale sign. Normally, I'd decline to indulge his questions, but he's earned the right. "What is it?"

“How are things going? Like, on the home front?”

Home front. The words taste strange. I can't say that I've ever had a home front before. “Fine.”

“So you aren't bored out of your mind?”

I don't blame him for assuming as much. Not so long ago, the idea of lying low and staying out of the action would never have even occurred to me as an option.

“No,” I say in subtle amazement. “I guess not.”

“Didn't think so,” Petro agrees. “You don't look bored at all.”

“How's Emma?”

He raises his eyebrows. “She's fine. Gets about with her life. She works hard, parties hard, makes questionable choices when it comes to men she meets at bars. But otherwise, there's no reason to assume that Gregor's even watching her. I actually think we should pull the sentries. It's a waste of resources.”

“No. Keep eyes on her.”

He nods, still fidgety. “Fine. So, Dan... what next?”

I take a beat. I think about how much longer I can dare to prolong this for. The conclusion is always the same. No matter how many times I hem and haw and reassess from new angles, there's only one course of action.

“The time for lying low is done,” I say. “It's time to act.”

I expected Petro to whoop and holler and do his normal shtick. But to my surprise, he looks more contemplative than I've ever seen him before.

“I hope you don't mind my pointing this out, but you don't look all that enthusiastic about leaving your little mountain getaway.”

I roll my eyes. “Jesus. They must've hit you in the head harder than you realized.”

Petro chuckles, though there's a sort of wistful note in there that's also new. I don't like all this change I'm seeing in him.

“I know I haven’t always been encouraging when it came to Kinsley. I just... I honestly didn’t expect it to come to anything. She’s the mother of your child. I figured it would be simpler if she just stayed the mother of your child.”

“As opposed to what?”

“As opposed to... your person.”

“I don’t have a person,” I say flatly. “I have myself. That’s all I need.”

Petro looks like he wants to say something else, but he swallows it and nods crisply. “If you say so. I stand corrected.”

The silence between us festers strangely. We’ve always been open, him and I, ever since the beginning. But he can sense I’m holding something back. I can sense him sensing it, too, and it makes for a weird, jarring feedback loop.

“Make arrangements for a flight out of the country,” I tell him, if only to break up the clamor of thoughts in my head. “I’ll go back and break the news to Isla and Kinsley. I’ll take them there. And then... I’ll be back to do what needs doing.”

“Got it, boss.”

I turn and start to head back for home. Petro watches me walk away. When I realize he isn’t moving, I stop and face him again.

“What?”

Petro shrugs. “If anyone can convince you to walk away from all this, I’m putting my money on Kinsley.”

I laugh, but it peters out quickly into more of that same, strangled silence. “You’re confused.”

Petro smiles. “And you’re defensive.”

I shake my head. “Fifteen minutes and you’re already annoying the living hell out of me. I don’t know why I keep you around.”

“Eye candy, of course. And the delightful repartee.”

I swear under my breath and resume the march back to the cabin. The air gets thin as I make the climb, rocks sliding under my feet. I barely notice the chill or the lack of oxygen, though, because I'm so lost in thought. Petro's words keep circling around in my head.

Walk away from the Vlasov Bratva? Because Kinsley would want me to?

It's fucking ludicrous. I would never consider it. Not for a single—

But then I see a flash of Kinsley in my mind. The way she looked just a few hours ago, before I carried her to bed. Eyes closed, mouth parted, bare skin gleaming in the moonlight as she rode me to orgasm. I remember the way she rested her body against mine afterwards and tucked her face against the curve of my neck. I remember how I counted her breaths, waiting for the comfort that sound brought me to sour into boredom or irritation.

It never happened.

Fuck.

If Gregor saw me now, he would laugh in my face. Distracted—by a fucking woman, no less. *Only a fool lets his heart get in the way of his ambition.*

It's like he's in the room with me, whispering his poison in my ear. A poison that I willingly drank for so long that it became a part of me. It's in every bone, every cell. There's no expelling it now.

“Daniil?”

I twist around at the sound of her voice. It's soft, gentle, drenched with sleep.

“Where'd you go?” she asks, stepping out of the bathroom. “I woke up and you were gone.”

“I had business to deal with,” I tell her.

I know my voice is coming off gruff and impatient, but I'm wired now. It took only a half an hour's visit back to reality to dislodge the sense of false calm that I'd let myself get

swaddled up in since we arrived here. Swaddled up like a helpless fucking baby.

“What kind of business?”

“Our IDs are here.” I pull out the package and drop it onto the coffee table. Kinsley flinches, and I hate that it makes me cringe and regret causing it.

She picks up the package with cautious fingers and opens it out. She looks through the documents. “Ivy Carter,” she whispers. “You really did change my name.”

“You’ll be stuck with that name for a while. You might as well like it.”

She frowns. “How long is a while?”

“We’re on this again?”

Her eyebrows pull together. “What’s up with you?” she demands. “You’re crabbiest than usual. Most guys tend to be in a better mood the night after they get laid.”

“I was stupid to have let that happen at all.”

Her face falls. It’s instant, and it makes me want to kick myself in the nuts. “You don’t mean that,” she accuses softly.

“I mean every word. It was a mistake.”

She stares at me, lower lip wobbling. I try associating her face with her new name. No more Kinsley—it’s *Ivy* now.

But it’s grating. Mismatched. Pretty as the name may be, it’s not pretty enough for her. She deserves to wear her own name and nothing else.

Well, maybe something else.

Maybe she deserves to wear mine.

Her jaw tics and she swallows. “What happened?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, something happened between last night and now to make you this... It meant something, is what I’m trying to say. Last night meant something.”

Her green eyes churn with sadness and hope, each one fueling the other. I watch her and feel that now-familiar longing in my chest to help her hope win out. To build her a world that matches what she wants to see in it.

And at the same time, I feel the instinctive reaction to that longing: *snuff it all out*. I feel myself turning into the ugliest version of myself, and despite the newfound self-awareness, I can't seem to rein it in.

“Sure it meant something,” I snarl. “It meant that I was horny. And you—well, safe to say you felt the same.”

“Stop it.”

“Stop what, princess?” I ask. “You don't like hearing the truth?”

“This isn't truth. This is more of your usual bullshit.” She crosses her arms, eyes flaming. “You want to talk truth? The truth is that you seem hellbent on being the kind of man your father told you you were. What is that about, Daniil? You claim to hate your father, and yet you do everything in your power to try and live up to his expectations of you. Why is that?”

A valid question. One that I happen to have an answer to. The kind of answer that would completely destroy her feelings for me.

You'd think that would make it easy for me to say it out loud and be done with this meddlesome back-and-forth we seem to be eternally locked in. One quick story and I could slice this off at the root. It'd be so easy to say.

But I don't.

Because the idea of seeing her feelings for me die... I don't think I can handle that. Which means Petro was right.

Petro was absolutely right, and that pisses me the fuck off.

“You don't understand a thing about me or my life, *sladkaya*.”

She flings the fake IDs back onto the table. Then she marches right up to me and jabs an accusing finger in my face. Despite

the fact that she's freshly showered, I can still smell myself on her skin.

"You know what? I think you've got that all wrong. I know way too much about you and your life," she snaps, her green eyes scorching with the blaze of her attack. "Which is why you're pulling a Daniil right now. And before you can ask, a 'Daniil' is the act of getting defensive and combative when a person—namely me—gets too close, because God forbid that someone might know you, really *know* you. That idea is so damn terrifying that you'll try everything in your power to push them away and shut them out."

I applaud mockingly. "That's great stuff, Dr. Freud. Maybe you can explore my suppressed Oedipal complex, too. If we have enough time left in our session."

"Sarcasm," she snaps. "Another great defense mechanism. Honestly, Daniil, what the hell are you so afraid of?"

"I'm not afraid of anything."

"Right. Of course not. Because admitting fear is just another weakness, huh? And Gregor Semenov's son doesn't have any weaknesses. Is that how you were programmed?"

"You don't know the half of it."

"Admitting to weakness doesn't make you weak, Daniil. A strong man would know that."

"Maybe you should find yourself one of those then," I growl. "And stop following me around like a bitch in heat."

The moment the words are out of my mouth, I want to pull them back in and swallow them down so deep that they disappear for good.

But the monster inside me smacks his lips approvingly. *Good, it croons. Make her cry. Make her bleed. Make her suffer.*

Kinsley stares up at me, looking fierce and flawless and so devastatingly hurt. "You're a miserable bastard," she says at last, breaking the harsh silence that seems to unfurl around us like a storm.

Her voice quivers as she speaks. Tears slip down the corners of her eyes.

She was crying when I met her and she's crying now. Apparently, it doesn't matter what I'm doing, whether I'm trying to save her life or trying to ruin it—tears are an inevitability.

“I never pretended to be anything else,” I say coldly. “I can't help it if your imagination got away from you. Guess it runs in the family.”

I really am a miserable bastard.

I don't want her to hate me. Not really. But a part of me registers that maybe if she does hate me, it'll be easier for me to walk away from her when I have to.

And that time is coming. Far sooner than either of us ever wanted.

DANIIL

I sit on the balcony for a long time, brooding. But the cold isn't as refreshing as it was when we first arrived. Now, it's just lonely.

When I've had my fill of it, I go back in. The dawn is peeking over the mountains as I open Isla's door to see that she's still sleeping. The bathroom light is on, though, so I creep through the bedroom and step inside.

Kinsley is brushing out her hair on the stool in front of the vanity when I darken the doorway. She looks up at me. The air is still prickly with tension from our midnight fight.

"You'll have to pack," I tell her gruffly. "We leave as soon as the sun is up."

She nods tightly, then goes back to her brushing. I watch her run her hair through her fingers again and again. It's hypnotic. Lulling me into—well, not quite a daze, but something similar. It doesn't pull me out of reality, but rather deeper into it. Deeper into her. Into this little bubble we've been hiding in, pretending that the rest of the world doesn't exist.

It's been so easy to live in here with her. As us. As a family.

That's why we have to leave.

"Kinsley..."

She stiffens but keeps her gaze resolutely fixed on the path of the brush in her hand. She doesn't say a word.

"About what happened..."

I get lost somewhere between what I want to say and what I can say. Stuck at a crossroads with no idea which way to go.

“Are you gonna tell me you didn’t mean any of it?” she asks, voice clipped. “Because we both know that’s not true. You don’t really say anything you don’t mean, do you, Daniil?”

I let out a whistling sigh. “It came out too harsh.”

She snorts. “Is there a nice way to tell someone to fuck off?”

“That’s not what I was trying to do.”

She gets up abruptly, but then she just stands there staring up at me as though she can strike me down with the force of her glare.

“You really are broken, aren’t you?” she accuses. “More so than I am.”

I fold my arms across my chest. “Guess we got to the bottom of it then, huh? That’s me, irreparably fucked. Took you long enough to figure it out. But what does it say about you, princess? You wouldn’t have been attracted to me if I were a boring, sensible, well-adjusted guy. It’s the dysfunction that you go for. You crave the fucked-up parts of me most of all.”

“See?” she snaps, striding forward and jabbing me in the chest with the hairbrush like it’s a sword. “You can’t have a real conversation with me without getting all defensive and angry.”

“I’m always angry.”

“Yes, I know,” she says. “I also know why.”

“You don’t—”

She jabs me again, harder this time. “Oh, yes, I do. Because despite what you think, I’m not an idiot, Daniil. At least, I’m not always an idiot. And we’re more alike than even I realized.”

I snort derisively, even as I can feel my blood pressure rise and my hands start to shake. “Tell me more. I’m dying to know.”

“You’re angry,” she says softly, letting the fist holding the brush fall to her side. “With your father. With the world. But you’re angry with yourself most of all.”

I stiffen, and her eyes spark. I expect her to back off, having scored the blow she was looking for, but instead, she doubles down.

Maybe she's right. Maybe she's more like me than I could have ever imagined.

"You're angry with yourself because you couldn't save your mother from your father," she presses. "You have a chip on your shoulder because you carry the guilt of her death and your unborn brother's death around with you. It's the reason you went to jail, and it's the reason you broke out. You're punishing yourself again and again. But the grass is always greener, isn't it? You just con yourself into believing that the *next* punishment is the one that'll hurt you badly enough to finally clear your conscience. The *next* lash, the *next* scar, the *next* drop of spilled blood—that'll do the trick. So you're always hunting for pain. And you always will be. It'll never be enough."

Our chests are practically touching now. Mine is heaving like I just sprinted a mile all-out. Kinsley, on the other hand, is calm and icy. It's like we've switched roles, and I can't understate how much I fucking hate it. I'm running out of bricks in the walls I built around my soul, but she doesn't give a damn about that. She just keeps tearing them down, one by one by one.

"Don't like what I have to say, Daniil?" she asks softly. "Hitting too close to home, am I?"

"You need to find a hobby," I croak out. "Preferably one that isn't so damn focused on me."

She laughs humorlessly. "I would, but since you dragged me away from my life, I have nothing to do but psychoanalyze you. And it seems I'm getting pretty good at it."

"You're shooting in the dark, princess." I turn to leave, but she leaps between me and the door.

"You're not running away from this one. Not this time."

"Get out of my way."

“No, I don’t think I will,” she says. Her voice is strong. Her expression is stronger.

I can feel the anger course through my body. My hands curl into fists and it brings back that day. The day that I lost a piece of my soul to the monster who was molding me.

“Kinsley. Don’t fucking push me.”

“Or what?”

“You don’t want to find out.”

“Maybe I do,” she says. “Is that terrifying to you? Does it keep you up at night to know that there’s someone who actually wants to know you? Not the persona you’ve created, not the image you project to the world. Not the don, but the man.”

“You only think you want to know. The truth will change everything.”

“And what if it doesn’t?”

She lifts her hand and rests it squarely on my chest, right over my heartbeat. She keeps it there, and the pressure is gentle at first. Then she pushes down against me, as though she’s trying to leave an imprint.

Like she wants to literally rip my heart right out of my damn ribcage.

Like she hasn’t done that already.

“Ten years. Ten fucking years,” I growl in her face. “And you’re still the same naïve little girl I pulled out of that river.”

She stands steadfast. “I’d rather be naïve than dead on the inside.”

“That’s where you and I differ.”

“Please,” she scoffs, her face falling with disappointment. “You can spew all the bullshit you want about wanting to be cut off from your emotions, but it’s just that: bullshit.”

“You really know how to push my buttons.”

She pushes her palm deeper against my chest. “Yeah, I know. I can feel it.”

I look down at her hand, and all I want to do is shut her up. Every word is a needle in my skin, and every second spent with her palm resting on me like a comfort I don't deserve is exquisite torture.

I growl, a low rumble deep in my chest, then pick her up by her hips and shove her aside, out of the path of the door.

She stumbles but catches herself on the vanity. "Daniil, please —"

"Please what?" I snap, whirling around.

She doesn't say anything, but then again, she doesn't have to. Like always, her eyes say it all for her.

Hope. That's what I see there. Hope as green and new as springtime. Hope like an emerald finally seeing the light of day after millennia spent buried beneath the earth.

But there is no hope for me. Not since the day I lost a part of my soul to Gregor Semenov. I'd assumed that standing up to him might help absolve me in some way. I thought that leaving his Bratva and starting my own might absolve me. I hoped that giving up his name for my mother's might absolve me.

But the weight I've carried around in my chest since that day... It's still there. Heavy and horrific. Eating into my life like a cancer that refuses to go away.

I can't draw Kinsley into my world, knowing what I'm capable of.

As much as I sneer at her naivete and her innocence, it's only an outward reaction. Those are the qualities I love most about her. I don't want to taint them by exposing her to the poison in my veins.

"We leave tomorrow," I intone flatly. "I expect your obedience on this issue."

"You ask for a lot, Daniil. Especially when you give so little in return."

"Then perhaps you should demand more for yourself, instead of settling like your mother did."

She jerks back like I slapped her. This is the moment to apologize for once in my fucking life. To soothe the pain from her eyes, the kind of pain only I can inflict on her, because it's the ones we love and the ones who love us that are the most capable of making us suffer.

I would know.

So yes, this is the moment. I could seize it. I could mend things. I could have hope, too.

Instead, I snuff it out.

"In fact, maybe you're more like her than you realize," I snarl.

Instead of delivering fire in return, though, Kinsley just sinks back onto the stool she was on when I entered. She clasps her hands in her lap and stares at the middle distance between us.

"Maybe I am," she says at last. "Maybe this is just a self-fulfilling prophecy. You fear something so much, that unintentionally, that's exactly what happens. Right?"

I loathe this tension in the air. It's like the pressure building up behind a geyser or a volcano ready to burst. We're lodged somewhere between a nervous breakdown and true catharsis, and I'm sick of wondering which it will be.

"*Sladkaya*—"

"I hate when you call me that," she snaps. Then her voice softens and drops to a whisper. "No, that's not true. What I hate is how much I love when you call me that."

I'm silent for what feels like an eternity, though it can't be more than a minute or two.

Then, before I realize what's happening, words are coming out of my mouth.

"I thought about you a lot, you know. In the time between. The decade since we met." She looks up at me, curious but quiet. I swallow and press on. "Mostly, it happened whenever I lost focus on the things I was using to *keep* myself from thinking about you." I crack the knuckles on one hand, more of a nervous habit than anything else. "I wondered all the time if you went back to the motherfucker you left at the altar. I

wondered something else, too, if I'm being honest. I wondered why you did what you did when we met. Why you said yes. Why you kissed me."

She doesn't seem to know what to say. Her eyes flit around the room like she's looking for an escape hatch. But she's as trapped in this as I am. In this room. In this bubble. In this hope.

"I kissed you because you saved my life," she says, breaking the silence at last. "No one ever tried to save me before. Most people were just content to let me drown."

Then she sets the brush down on the counter with a final clack, rises, and walks out of the room. I stand there for a long time after she's gone, staring at that brush and the strands of her hair still trapped in it like ripped silk.

I hate this dance we're trapped in. I can't keep seeing the hope in her eyes when I know that it can only end in pain.

That'll kill me faster than Gregor will.

KINSLEY

Hope is a stubborn bitch. Really hard to kill. You think you've snatched it from the sky, plucked out all its feathers, cut its throat. And then the moment your back is turned, it spreads its wings again. It takes flight. It sings.

Every time I think I've reached the end of my rope with Daniil, he gives me something—just one morsel—that keeps me going. A meaningful look. The tiniest smirk. And I take that little morsel and use it to sustain myself just a little longer.

I can still sense his presence around the house. He was pacing outside the window for a long time after our conversation in the bathroom. When I check again, he hasn't stopped.

"Fine," I mutter to myself. "You just stay out there and freeze to death. See if I care."

Joke's on me, though. Because I do care. Try as I might, I can't make myself stop caring.

I glance at the door to the bedroom. Isla woke up half an hour ago and said she had a dream she wanted to draw. She's been at it ever since with an almost religious zeal on her face. She probably won't emerge for another hour at least.

Which means I'm here on my own, with nothing but my thoughts for company. That's a scary concept. My thoughts haven't done me very many favors as of late.

I make myself another cup of coffee, with sugar and cream. Then, without even thinking about it, I make a second cup of coffee. Black.

I put on my jacket and take both mugs outside, to where Daniil is—surprise, surprise—still pacing.

He comes to an abrupt stop when he sees me, like he's only just now remembering that I exist. I wish it were that easy for me to forget about him.

"Here," I say, offering him the mug of black coffee. "I thought you might be cold."

He takes the mug and stares at the contents. "Is it poisoned?"

I almost smile. "Just enough to land you in the hospital. It won't kill you, though. You can't get off that easy."

He takes a big sip and sighs. His eyes go unfocused again almost instantly, though. Wherever his head is, it isn't here.

"What's wrong with you?" I blurt. It's a blunt question, but an honest one.

He chuckles sadly. "You want the long list or the short one?"

"At this point, I'll take whatever list you're willing to share with me."

His eyes grow cautious and I feel myself recoiling. A question I've been pondering lately: at the end of the day, what's the difference between hope and masochism? At least masochists know their pain is coming sooner or later. Hoppers and dreamers never know anything for certain.

So maybe I shouldn't have come out here at all. I shouldn't have engaged him in conversation. It's only going to end up hurting me. But I did it anyway. Because the pain feels worth it if it means I get to share something—*anything*—with him.

"So we're leaving," I say, breaking the silence because I know Daniil won't. "Again. Where to this time? Shangri-La? Zimbabwe? Mars?"

"Switzerland."

I frown. "Why Switzerland?"

"I went there once as a teenager. I enjoyed it. I thought you and Isla would, too."

“Who’d you have to kill in Switzerland?”

He doesn’t laugh. “It was to see family. It was the only trip I ever took with my mother. She lived there for a while.”

“Your mother is Swiss?”

“Half. My grandfather was Russian. My grandmother was Swiss. I got the blue eyes from her.”

I smile. He’s actually leaning into the conversation. I’m aware he’s intentionally trying to keep it in safe, neutral territory, but I appreciate the effort all the same. Every tidbit I can get about his past feels like just another piece of the puzzle that is Daniil Vlasov. Maybe if I collect enough of them, he’ll start to make sense to me.

I wouldn’t need all of them. Just a few. Just a few more morsels to string myself along for a few more days.

“Did you get to meet her? Your grandmother, I mean.”

“That trip was the first and last time I saw her,” he tells me. “She was dying, and my mother wanted to visit her before she bit the dust.”

“Charming.”

He acknowledges that with only a detached smirk. “My mother and grandmother had been estranged for years. Pretty much from the moment she got involved with my father.”

“Ah. Grammy didn’t approve?”

“She wanted a good man for her daughter. My father didn’t exactly fit the bill.”

“That’s my hope for Isla, too. A good man.”

“Isla won’t need a man at all,” Daniil says fiercely. “Good, powerful, or otherwise.”

“She might not need one. But she might want one at some point,” I point out, as gently as possible. “Nobody is an island. We’re not meant to exist in isolation, Daniil. Every single one of us needs companionship. Help. Love.”

As I say it, it's so easy to see the parts of him that are missing. He's never had anyone to pick him up when he fell. He's never had a person in his life who could look him in the eye and say, *I'm here for you no matter what. And if you can't handle the weight of your life right now, that's okay. I'll take some of the load.*

“Jesus fucking—”

“What?” I interrupt. “Are you gonna call me a silly, naïve little idiot again? Because you've already done that. Are you gonna call me a pathetic romantic who still believes in fairytales? ‘Cause you've done that, too. And guess what: I'm still here, Mr. Monster. Wanna try again?”

Somehow, I've walked myself right up to him. I'm staring him in the face, and despite the height difference between us, this is the first time that I don't feel quite so short in his presence.

Then, before I can figure out what my goal is here, I shove him as hard as I can in the chest. He's not expecting it—I know that only because he actually stumbles backwards a few steps, nearly spilling his coffee in the process. He looks down at me in shock, like he can't believe that actually just happened.

Then his eyes burn hot. He drops the mug in his hand to the ground, crosses the distance between us, snatches me up, pins me against the wall...

And kisses me.

It's a kiss on fire. It's a full-on, gritty, carnal, intense, passionate, desperate, fuck-me-out-here-in-the-woods kind of kiss. His tongue finds mine and we wind together. He paws at my hips and grinds himself into me. I'm trapped between the stone of his body and the actual stone of the mountainside, being crushed by both, and I've never felt more alive.

I comb my fingers through the hair at the back of his head, pulling him closer, because *yes, fuck, this what we needed, catharsis, the next step, this is it—*

And then he breaks away.

Oh, for fuck's sake. Not this again.

He rests his forehead against mine. Our breath fogs the air together, a single cloud of exhaled longing.

“Fucking hell, Kinsley,” he groans. “We have to stop this.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m not good for you,” he snaps. He releases me and steps away. “Why can’t you see that? I’m not fucking good for you.”

“If you truly believed that, then you wouldn’t have come after me.”

“I didn’t—”

“You hunted me down and shoved insurance papers in my hand. And that was before you knew about Isla, so don’t even try pulling out that card. You wanted a reason to see me. You wanted an excuse to be in my life. You were just too proud to admit it. Just like you’re too damn stubborn to admit it now.”

He runs a hand down his face, looking both tired and defeated. “I made mistakes. I was short-sighted. Most times, I think it would have been better if our paths had never crossed at all.”

That makes me stop dead in my tracks. “But... but then you would never have known Isla. And she would never have known you.”

“Maybe not. But she wouldn’t have been kidnapped, and she wouldn’t be on the run or in any danger right now.”

The sting of his guilty words hit me hard. I take a step towards him and open my mouth, but before I can—

“Don’t,” he snarls, holding up his hand like I’m some sort of pariah. “Just don’t. I’m... Fuck, please just don’t.”

The sigh leaves my body heavily, but it doesn’t take any of the weight with it. “Fine. You don’t need anyone, least of all me. You’ve made that abundantly clear. But I’m not like you. I *do* need people. And right now... right now, I need to speak to my best friend. Especially if we’re leaving the country for God knows how long. So I know it’s against your rules, but I would like to speak to Emma before we leave. Just one short call, just to say goodbye, and then I will go quietly and willingly to

Switzerland or India or Cambodia, wherever the hell you take us to. I just want one call with my best friend first. Please.”

He offers me a stingy glance, and then he nods. “I have a few burner phones left. You can use one.”

I’m a little speechless. I really didn’t expect that he would agree so quickly or so easily.

“But,” he adds, “you will not give her any details. About where we’ve been, where we’re going, or what our new names are. None of it. Do I make myself clear?”

“Abundantly.”

He nods again and turns his back on me. I stand there for a couple of minutes, waiting for him to turn back around. But he doesn’t. So I go back to the cabin and wait.

Somehow, despite the roaring fire in the hearth... it’s colder in here than it was out there.

KINSLEY

“Did ya miss me?” I ask.

I have to hold the phone away from my ear for a second while Emma screams at the top of her lungs. By the time I put it back up, she’s still breathlessly whispering, “Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God.”

I laugh. “Breathe, Em. Before you have a stroke.”

“Is it really you?”

“Depends on who you think this is.”

Emma squeals again and I lean forward, paranoid that the signal’s going to crap out on me and the line will go dead. “I’m on a burner phone, freezing my ass off on top of the one hill in this entire mountain range that has reception. So if I cut out—”

“I’ll know why. Got it. Tell me everything! How’s Isla? Where are you guys? Is your black knight still devastatingly broody, or have you broken through to his heart of gold yet?”

“Safe to say you’ve been missing us, huh?”

“Oh, hon, like you wouldn’t believe.”

“I miss you too,” I say, feeling mushy all the sudden. “So, so much.”

“Aw, Kinz,” Emma says gently. “Are you okay?”

“It’s been an... interesting couple of days.”

“Good interesting or bad interesting?”

“A little bit of both, I think. I can’t say too much. But Isla’s good. She thinks we’re on a big adventure. I’m hesitant to tell her that most adventures don’t include mountainside mansions, but to be honest, even that wouldn’t knock her shine. She’s a trooper. I even think... Well.”

“Go on,” she urges when I fall silent.

I bite my lip. “I even think she’s coming out of her shell a little bit. And I think Daniil is helping with that.”

“They get along, huh?”

“You have no idea. Sometimes, it actually makes me a little jealous. Is it horrible for me to admit that?”

“Of course not. This is a judgment-free zone. But Kinz, you sound...” She hems and haws for a second, and then finishes with, “shaky. You sound shaky.”

I let out a rattling sigh. It’s cold here. My skin is prickly with goosebumps. “It’s just been difficult. Being away from home. Not being able to go to work, or see you, any of that. I’ve missed you so much.”

There’s a beat of silence on the other line. “Kinz, honey, is there something you want to tell me?”

I bite my lip. “Well...”

“This is about Daniil, isn’t it? You’re in love with him, aren’t you?”

I take a deep breath, and look down at the house-in-the-cliff way down below me. I can see Isla lounging by the birdbath, sketching idly. Daniil is sitting a few yards away from her, brooding up a storm. Every now and then, I see their mouths move, but I’m too far to catch anything they’re saying.

“I can’t be,” I whisper back. “There’s no future there.”

“But you wish there was.”

“Of course I do,” I say fiercely. “And sometimes, I even convince myself that he wishes that, too. He can be sweet and thoughtful and open. And then... I don’t know. Two steps forward, a million steps back.”

“What if he’s scared?”

I bark out a laugh. “I don’t have the faintest idea what that would even look like. Daniil’s not scared of anything.”

“That’s exactly what he wants you to think, boo,” Emma insists. “You might not be able to imagine the things he’s done. What if it’s really, really bad? Would it really not matter to you if you found out that he... I don’t know... ate babies or something?”

I roll my eyes. “I think I can confidently rule that out.”

“You get my point. I’m just saying that maybe there’s a reason he’s keeping certain things from you. Maybe, deep down, he doesn’t want to run the risk of losing you, either.”

It does make sense when she puts it like that. Which is exactly why I wanted to talk to Emma in the first place. She’s a good egg. She knows me and loves me. I needed that in my life.

“So,” she says when I don’t reply for a while, “how was the sex?”

“Em!”

“Aw, come on, don’t be such a prude. Life’s been a little boring since you and Isla left. I’ve been gorging myself on gummy worms whenever I miss you guys, which means I’m going through a bag a day now. The least you could do to make up for the fact that you’re responsible for my fat ass is give me some salacious details.”

I bury my face in my hand. “Do they have to be salacious?”

“I would prefer it that way.”

“The sex was amazing,” I admit with a choked laugh. “But the sex with Daniil has always been amazing.”

“Tell me more. How big was—”

I shudder and interrupt here. “Okay, that’s enough detail. Can we move on, please?”

“But I like this topic.”

“We’ve talked about me enough. Tell me about you, how have you been doing since we left?”

“Same ol’ really. Work, home, repeat. A few Tinder dates here and there. Petro checks up on me every now and again. We chat when I’m really desperate for human interaction. He comes across as annoying at first, but then he grows on you. Like a cold sore I’m getting kinda fond of.”

I chuckle. “I thought you’d be sick of the cloak-and-dagger B.S. by now, actually.”

I hear the crinkle of plastic and know that Emma is digging into yet another bag of gummy worms. The girl single-handedly keeps Haribo in business. “I did ask Petro to ease up on the tight leash security-wise, but he said the bossman would have his balls on a platter if he did that.”

“It’s not a bad thing to keep security going a little longer. Daniil’s just being cautious. He knows how much you mean to Isla and me.”

“Which, to bring the point full-circle, would suggest that he does care about you. Otherwise, why would he use up so many resources trying to make sure the people you care about are safe?”

I bite back a smile. It’s a comforting thought, which means that there’s no way it can be true.

“Have you tried to just talk to him?” she presses. “A simple, honest conversation with no frills.”

“At this point, I’ve lost count of how much I’ve tried to do just that,” I scoff. “Even the simplest conversation with Daniil turns into a freaking minefield. Even if it starts out innocent, it never ends that way. I don’t know; it doesn’t even matter. He’s going to be gone soon.”

“Wait, what do you mean?”

“I mean, once he’s settled us in Switz—um, in the next place we’re moving to, then he’s coming back.”

“Oh.”

“He doesn’t know how long he’ll be. So we could be out of the country for six months, a year, ten years. There’s no way to know.”

“Are you prepared for that?”

“Not remotely. But I don’t have a choice.”

“Would it feel easier if he were staying with you?”

I take a deep breath. “I can’t lie: everything seems easier when Daniil’s around. Which doesn’t make a lick of sense considering we’re always butting heads, but—”

“You love him,” Emma finishes simply.

“I don’t want to love him, Em,” I say softly. “It would be so much easier if I didn’t. It would be so much simpler if he was Isla’s dad and nothing else.”

“Well, I hate to break it to you, sweetheart, but it’s not going to go away just because you decide it’s easier that way.”

“A girl can dream though, right?” I say miserably.

“Who knows? Sure, things are complicated at the moment. Maybe once this horrible business is done with, it’ll be time for a fresh start for all of you.”

“Sounds too good to be true.” I shiver against the cold.

“Whatever happened to believing in fairytales?”

“I’m trying not to be so naïve these days.”

“Why?” Emma demands. “It’s one of your best qualities.”

“Really? Because as far as I can tell, it’s seemed to land me in nothing but a whole load of trouble.”

“Well, at least you’re finally living your life.”

“I was living before,” I say defensively.

“No, you were *enduring* before. There’s a difference,” she asserts. “You had a job. You had a house. You have exactly one friend. A good friend, a hot friend, a very charming friend, but still only one. You barely went on any dates and when you did, it was because I forced you to with threats and blackmail.”

“What else did I need? I had Isla. I had you.”

“And you’ll always have the both of us, honey,” Emma says gently. “But I hope to get married one day. I hope to build my career and travel the world and live it up. And if you do your job well with Isla, she’s going to leave one day, too. When that stuff happens, what will you be left with?”

What will I be left with? Great question. I know the answer, honestly. I’ll be the woman standing at the edge of a canyon, wondering what will happen if I take one step over the edge.

Down below, I see Daniil stand and dust himself off. He looks up the hill right to where I’m sitting. “It’s time to go,” I say to Emma.

She sighs. “I love you more than life itself, Kinsley Jane.”

“Love you, too, Em.”

I hang up and stare down the mountainside, watching Daniil and Isla, slowly realizing that I’m looking at everything that makes my world go round. Take one away, and my life would feel incomplete.

And all I can think is...

When the hell did that happen?

DANIIL

They're both in awe. But whereas Isla is shameless about it, Kinsley is doing her damndest to keep me from noticing. Our daughter has her face flush against the window, cheeks bright with excitement, oohing and ahing at everything we see. Kinsley hasn't said a word since we landed in Switzerland and picked up our new car.

"Look at the little houses!" Isla exclaims as we pass a row of pale pink homes, festooned with flower-decked balconies. "I wish we lived in a pink house. Wait!" She turns to me. "We're getting a new one. Is it pink?"

I chuckle. "You'll have to wait to find out."

We take the next left turn and find ourselves in the shopping district of Lucerne. The river is just a few meters over, but it's hidden by the maze of hotels and restaurants perched on the water's edge.

"This is so cool," Isla breathes. "Mom, isn't this the coolest?"

"Mhmm," Kinsley says. I detect an uncomfortable tilt in her voice. Like she's trying hard to cover something up that she doesn't want me to see.

My eyes land on her. She slept a few hours on the plane ride over, and she'd been quiet the rest of the time. I kept glancing at her, waiting for her to pepper me with questions or sass—more of the usual. But I got nothing the entire time.

I don't like it.

I stop the car in front of a tall building painted in a soft baby blue and framed with white. “Oh my God,” Isla gasps. “This is better than pink.”

The valet greets us and helps unload our collection of baggage from the trunk. A bellboy loads it all onto a cart and assures me he’ll meet us upstairs, while the valet takes our car to park somewhere unseen.

Isla, Kinsley, and I ride the elevator to the top floor. Isla is as impressed by the old-timey bronzed grates that seal us in as she has been by every other detail since the second we touched down.

True to his word, the bellboy is waiting for us when we reach the top, along with a suited concierge. Both bow as we approach.

“Here you are, sir, madam, and miss,” the concierge says, in the unplaceable accented English of the Swiss. “I hope you will find your new home to your tastes.”

He opens the door with a flourish and gestures us inside.

I let my women go first. Kinsley and Isla walk in, their faces identical masks of amazement. The amount of work I’d put into securing this building all becomes worth it.

The walls ripple with swirling blue wallpaper framed by intricate crown molding. Wingback sofas with clawed feet perch in the living room on gleaming mahogany floors, surrounding a fireplace of soft white sandstone. In the kitchen, fixtures and details shine in a black metal that sparkles against the eggshell cabinetry. Tasteful oil paintings line the walls—landscapes, mostly, of places that look too serene to be real.

Isla doesn’t wait for permission. She just drops her drawing pad on the floor right where she was standing and takes off sprinting down the hall to explore the rooms. Kinsley meanders to the window and looks out at our view of the river winding past the buildings below. I tip the bellhop once he’s done unloading our luggage. He bows once more and leaves.

And then we’re alone.

It's strange how it feels like so long since that was the case. When did she become so vital to me, that half a day without feeling her close is an eternity?

I eye her, though she's pointedly ignoring me. She's standing by the balcony in her light blue sweater and dark blue jeans, melting into the wallpaper behind her like she's already part and parcel of this place. Her dark hair tumbles down her back in messy waves. Her eyelids are still puffy and her cheeks creased from where she slept on the plane. I want to smooth those lines out, one soft kiss at a time.

Gritting my teeth, I turn and take her bags into the master bedroom. When I return to the sitting room, she's right where I left her. I join her there.

"There are no skyscrapers," she murmurs, gazing out the window at what passes for a skyline here.

"Europe isn't as fond of those as America is."

"How come?"

"Too new. Too big. Too jarring. They prefer the old ways. I'm mostly inclined to agree."

She nods distractedly and glances away again, as though she's not really paying attention to my answer. When she glances at me, her expression is convoluted. Her face is normally an open book. Today, though, it's written in a language I can't understand.

"We're going to be here for a long time, aren't we?" she asks suddenly.

"It depends."

Kinsley laughs bitterly. "I'm sure it does." Her eyes drift back out to the river, glowing in the sunlight beneath us like the back of a snake. "When do you leave?"

I grimace. There's that catch in her voice again, a harsh, sandpapery quality I don't like. "End of the week." I hesitate, then add, "I'll check in when I can."

"When you can, huh?" she says. "Well, I suppose that's better than nothing."

“What are you trying to imply, Kinsley?” I growl. “That I’ll forget about the two of you the moment you’re out of sight?”

“I don’t care if you forget about me,” she answers coolly. “I care about what this will do to our daughter.”

“She’s prepared for this.”

“Oh, excuse me. Well, if you say she’s prepared, everything’s peachy then, isn’t it?”

Bratty, feisty, infuriating—and yet I still prefer this version of Kinsley to the quiet one. Even fighting with her is an improvement over silence. Because fighting means we’re both still clinging to the hope that we might somehow make it out of this alive and together. Silence means we’re giving up.

I’ve never been much of one for hope. That’s more Kinsley’s department.

But goddammit, I won’t let the silence win this time.

KINSLEY

All I want is to tell him that I see him. That I *see* him, the real him. I've tried to say it exactly like that before and it went terribly every time. If I tell him I see the scars he thinks he's hiding from the world, he closes up. If I tell him the things that happened to him and in front of him are not his fault, he circles the wagons and shuts me out.

He turns and walks away from me. As far as the forty foot width of the room will allow. He stops at the opposite wall and keeps his back to me for several long seconds. He's breathing deeply. I watch those broad shoulders of his rise and fall in time with my heartbeat.

"Daniil?"

He flinches at the sound of my voice. Then his hands curl into fists. Even from here, his rippling anger is palpable.

I cross the space between us and place my hand on his shoulder. I don't even have time to put pressure on him before he turns back around, his face a mask of black anger. His eyes look like they've turned gray from fury.

"You don't have a fucking clue."

Everything about him right now makes me want to cry. Frustrated tears or sad tears, I'm not quite sure which. "No?" I challenge. "Then why don't you clue me in? There's something you're not telling me, Daniil. I want to know what."

"Careful what you wish for, princess," he drawls.

“Consider me warned. Have you ever considered the possibility that if you tell me this big, scary secret of yours, then maybe, just maybe, it’ll lose its power? Whatever hold it has on you will be over and you can finally move on.”

“Move on?” he repeats, deadpan. His scowl turns into a sinister smile. “Sometimes, I forget what a naïve little fool you are.”

“Funny, I never forget what an asshole you are. But I’m still here, aren’t I?”

“For now.”

“Are you trying to build up suspense?” I ask. “Or am I supposed to guess? Okay, let’s see—did you cheat on a math test?”

He just stands there glowering at me. So I continue on my tirade, because it feels good to yell. It feels good to push back after a lifetime of pulling back.

“No? Then did you steal some kid’s ice cream cone and make him watch while you ate it?”

“Kinsley—”

“Wrong again, huh? You jaywalked when the light said don’t go? You stole a buck out of the cafe tip jar?”

“A wiser woman would just stop talking to me.”

“Well, apparently, I’m a lot of things you hate, and I lack a lot of things you love. So whichever way you slice it, I come up short. Lucky for me, I’m past the point of caring. Just tell me what this big, dark secret of yours is. You want to convince me you’re a monster? Well, so far, you haven’t succeeded. So here’s your chance. Go right ahead. The stage is yours.”

He stares at me, barely blinking, looking like hell made flesh.

“Okay, princess. You want my secret? You can have it.”

His sentences are short and his words are sharp. They slice through the air like throwing stars, making me feel like I have to duck to avoid them.

I asked for this, didn't I? Pushed him to the brink, and now that I've finally convinced him to lay all his cards on the table, I'm scared.

What if it is unforgivable? What if Emma's right, and it's so horrible that it forever changes my opinion of him? What if it makes me regret inviting him into our lives, into Isla's life?

Breathe, Kinsley. Breathe.

"Frightened you now, have I, *sladkaya*?" Daniil asks, taking in my pale face. "I haven't told you anything yet. You're sure you still want to know?"

I rally and shake my head. "I want to know."

He nods. "I told you that my father repeatedly abused my mother."

"Yes."

"It was one thing when I was a boy. If I spoke up, I'd get beaten and slowly, over the years, he managed to train me into silence. But there was a point at which things shifted. I grew taller than he was. Stronger. And still—I stood by and watched him beat her. Torture her. Break her down."

"You had no choice."

"Maybe that was true when I was a child. But after a point, I was a man. A man standing by and watching a woman, my own mother, take fist after fist, blow after blow—"

"Daniil—"

He talks over me. I wanted the secret and apparently, I was going to get it. "But you want to explain away my behavior there, too? Okay, let's do that. Make excuses for me. Justify my cowardice. Fine. But I dare you to go ahead and justify the behavior of a son who stood at attention while his mother lost the unborn baby brother she carried."

It takes a moment for his words to make sense in my brain. He seems to realize I'm having a problem, because he stops talking. He fixes me with that cold, dead expression and waits for my reaction.

“What’s wrong, princess?” he practically bites at me. “Nothing to say now?”

I feel incredibly cold all of a sudden. And sad. So deeply sad that I feel like I need to sit down from the weight of it. Not that Daniil gives me the chance. He takes a step forward, probably anticipating a cringe. But I just stand there, frozen in place, waiting for something.

I just don’t know what.

“Y-you were there when it happened?” I ask in a small voice.

“Yes,” he says harshly, offering nothing else. “Standing there, watching her suffer. He made me watch. I tried to call for help, and he ordered me to stay in place. To not move a fucking muscle.”

“But... why?”

“Why? Because my father was the don, and I was his heir, and whatever he commanded, I was required to obey. It was his most absolute rule. He expected obedience from every man who answered to him, and I was no different. He wanted to beat the humanity out of me, and he knew that doing it with his own two fists wasn’t the way. He thought this was better. He was right.”

A tear slips loose, and I wipe it away hurriedly. But of course, he notices.

“Don’t waste your tears,” he snarls. “My mother is long dead, and she’s better off in death than she ever was in life.”

“I’m not crying for your mother,” I say softly. “I mean, I’m not crying *only* for your mother.”

His eyes spark. But I can’t catch the emotion. “Don’t tell me you’re crying for me?” he asks, laughing coldly. “There’s no point in mourning for a monster. Or are you mourning the loss of the man I could have been?”

“Daniil, please... stop.”

“Stop what? You wanted the truth. You asked for it. You wanted to know why I kept you at arm’s length. Well, this is it. The truth, raw and unadulterated. You hate your father because

he hit your mother. You ran from your fiancé because he hit you. And now, there's me. The man you claim to know so well. I have done far worse than your father and your ex-fiancé combined. You still think you can save me?"

More tears slide down my cheeks. He's not giving me time to process anything. He's digging his heels in, expecting me to do what: run away screaming? Go and hide under a rock until he leaves? Stop loving him?

"I don't know if I can save you," I say. "But... I still want to."

Then, all of a sudden, he lunges forward. He grabs me by the throat and pushes me against the wall. None of it hurts me. He's not trying to hurt me; he's trying to make a point. He's trying to scare me into believing what he believes of himself.

"How about now, little fool?" he growls, his fingertips digging into the sides of my neck. "Still think I'm worth saving?"

More tears. Damn it, I wish I could stop crying. But I can't seem to summon up any other reaction to something of this magnitude.

All I can do is look him in the eye when I speak. "You are to me."

The scowl on his face dissolves into shock, then disbelief. Then—

"M-Mom? Papa?"

Daniil drops his hand immediately and spins around. I look towards the door. Isla stands in the threshold, watching us both with wide eyes. She looks scared and confused. Her eyes dart from me to Daniil and then back again.

"Honey," I manage to say, but the word comes out strangled.

The sound of my voice snaps her out of her state of shock. She looks as though she's just realized she's standing on quicksand and she's about to fall through it any moment.

"Isla, baby, come here."

But instead of running towards me, she turns and bolts. I follow her, but she's too quick—and by the time I step into the

living room, all I see is the front door softly clicking shut.

“Oh my God,” I gasp. “She... she ran out of here...”

Daniil follows me into the living room, his face a mask of composure. All those erratic emotions are a thing of the past now.

“I’ll find her,” he says, heading for the door.

“I’ll come with you.”

“No,” he says. “You need to stay here in case she comes back.”

“I know my daughter, Daniil. She won’t come back here. Not anytime soon. It’s going to take the two of us to find her.”

He turns to me and I brace myself for another fight, but he doesn’t say anything. He just looks so deeply regretful that I can feel the sting of his pain from across the room.

“Sladkaya...”

I walk over to him and place my hand against his cheek. “I know,” I whisper softly. “But we can’t talk about this now. Right now, we need to find our daughter. Together.”

He nods. “Together.”

DANIIL

“What do you mean, ‘Isla ran away’?” Petro asks. He’s been on the ground in Switzerland for all of thirty minutes, attending to errands around the city before I go back to America while he takes my place watching the Whitlow women here. Needless to say, he’s a little confused by the abrupt turn of events.

“It’s not a fucking riddle, *sobrat*. She walked in on us arguing. Then she bolted.”

I have no idea what to do with this hollow feeling in my stomach. I don’t even have an emotion to attach to it. It feels like there are parasites chewing their way out from the inside.

Petro frowns. “How bad was it?”

“I had my hand around Kinsley’s throat.”

“Jesus, brother.” Petro looks at me in shock. “That’s not your style.”

No, it’s not my style. So why did I insist on trying to prove to Kinsley that it was? To freak her out? To scare her off? To convince her that I am my father, that I am her father, that I am every man who’s ever committed an unforgivable sin?

It doesn’t matter that I’ve been punishing myself ever since. A few minutes of abject self-loathing changes nothing. Neither does a decade of it. It’s the reason I can’t let myself have what I really want: because I don’t deserve it.

“We have to find her.”

“Don’t worry; this town’s small. We’ll locate her within the hour. You take the south side. I’ll take the north.”

“What about me?” Kinsley asks, emerging from the building, wearing a coat and holding a second one. Isla’s. Of course she’d bring Isla’s coat. I don’t know why that simple, thoughtful gesture makes my heart seize up hard in my chest.

“You should wait here,” Petro suggests. “In case Isla comes —”

“Don’t waste your breath,” I interrupt. “She’s not going to listen.”

“Exactly,” Kinsley agrees. “I’m taking this side of the river. If anyone finds her—”

“Here,” Petro says, pulling out a shiny new phone for her. “That’s yours. My number and Daniil’s are already saved in it. Call us if you find her.”

She nods and takes off down the road. She doesn’t so much as glance at me as she goes.

There’d been forgiveness on her face right before Isla had walked in. I wonder if that will last.

“Don’t worry, brother,” Petro says, slapping me on the back. “We’ll find her.”

I head off into the south side of the town, my eyes peeled for a young girl with curly brown hair and a look of disappointment on her face.

I have no idea how she’ll react when she sees me. Will she run? Will she be scared? She saw something she should never have seen.

I curse myself internally. I saw too much parental abuse as a child. So did Kinsley. And here I am, repeating the cycle. *Learn from history, lest ye be doomed to repeat it.*

I’m a fool.

I loop around the town, but twenty minutes later, I’ve yet to locate Isla. Dying sunlight is caught amongst the greenery. Another hour and it’ll be full dark.

When I hear the quacking of ducks, I follow the sound to a pond surrounded by a park. I freeze when I see her sitting by the bank of the pond. She's got her legs hiked up and her arms wrapped around her knees. She's cold; I can tell from the huddled way she's sitting, staring at the ducks paddling along in the water.

"Isla," I say softly, so I don't startle her.

She startles anyway, her body twisting towards me with alarm. I don't move towards her. I don't want to frighten her off.

"You scared us."

She doesn't say anything. Instead, she eyes me warily.

"Can I sit down next to you?"

She considers that. Then, finally, she nods. I cloak my relief and take a seat, leaving space between us so that she's comfortable.

The moment I'm seated, I send Petro and Kinsley a quick text, letting them know where we are. Then I turn my attention to Isla. She's back to looking at the ducks, but her eyes are unfocused and glazed over.

"I'm sorry about what you saw."

"You were hurting Mom," she says in a small voice.

I can't even deny it. That was exactly what I was doing. Even worse, that's exactly what I intended to do. "I know. I shouldn't have done that. It was wrong."

"But why did you do it?"

"We were arguing."

"About what?"

"About—well, about lots of things."

She shakes her head in disgust. "You're going to tell me that it's too complicated to explain and that I won't understand anyway, right?"

I sigh. "If any kid has a chance of understanding, it's you. But some things are between your mother and me, and it's not

right for me to share them without her permission. What I can tell you is this: your mother is an amazing woman. As for me... I'm not quite as good as she is. She's calm and patient and good to her core. I'm none of those things."

She turns her huge eyes up at me. "Is that why you're leaving?"

"No. I'm leaving because I have to settle things at home. But it is the reason I can't be in your lives the way I would like to be."

"How would you like to be in our lives?"

I should have known better than to get into a conversation like this with a nine-year-old. But since I deserve the interrogation, I answer her.

"Wholly," I say. "Like a family."

She looks back over to the ducks. "My grandpa used to hit my grandma," she says. "That's what Mom said."

"Yes."

"It's wrong."

"Very."

"But today—"

"Today was a mistake. One I regret bitterly, and it won't ever happen again, Isla. I can promise you that."

She nods. "Mom says that people who hurt other people have been hurt, too." She turns her eyes up at me. "Who hurt you, Papa?"

I clench my teeth so hard I'm surprised a molar doesn't crack. "It's in the past, Isla."

"How can it be in the past?" she asks. "It's happening now."

This kid. She's too damn smart for her own good. "You're right. I suppose I was hurt by my father."

"The man in the gray suit? He was mean to you? Even when you were a little boy?"

"Yes."

“Where was your mom? Didn’t she protect you?”

“She did her best,” I explain haltingly. “But she was not in a position to help me. She was scared, just like I was. She had to listen to my father or he was cruel to her.”

Isla frowns. “But he seemed so nice when I met him.”

“Some people lure you in that way. Before they reveal who they truly are.”

“I don’t like him anymore.”

“No, neither do I.”

“Even though he’s your father.”

“Even though he’s my father,” I agree.

She nods and contemplates that for a while. Then she turns her eyes up to me once again and I know instantly that another impossible question is coming. “Papa?” she asks. “Do you love me?”

My gut twists painfully. I wonder when all my steel dissolved. Probably around the time she’d first looked at me and called me Papa. It was the first time I felt that burgeoning sense of obligation that belied all logic. It was the first time I felt like I had something to lose.

Say something, dammit. You’ve already fucked things up with Kinsley. Don’t fuck them up with your daughter, too. Don’t you dare. Some things can’t be fixed once they’re broken. This is one of them.

But nothing will come out of my mouth. It’s like I’m screaming silently. You’d think the words would come easily, considering they’re true, but I’ve never been the recipient of declarations like that. Nor have I ever offered them up. To anyone.

This is the moment, though. It’s do it now or lose her forever.

So say it, you bastard. Say it. Say it. Say.

“Yes, Isla Whitlow. I love you more than I ever thought I was capable of loving another person.”

Her smile becomes wider. “And what about Mom? Do you love her, too?”

I stare at her for a long time, waiting for a distraction. Any distraction. But there’s nothing but the quacking of ducks and the far-off sounds of a quiet little town that knows nothing of our troubles.

“I love your mother, too,” I say softly. “More than I know how to put into words.”

Then, of her own accord, Isla leans in and places her head right against my chest. I wrap my arm around her little shoulders and pull her against my warmth, and for a little while, we sit there, me and my daughter, loving each other in a way I didn’t think I’d ever get to experience.

“Isla!”

We turn together to see Kinsley standing just behind us, her eyes wide with relief.

“Mom!” Isla calls, stumbling to her feet and running towards Kinsley’s open arms. They cling to each other for a long time, and I just sit there and watch them. They make so much sense together. It’s weird to think about a time when there was Kinsley and me, without Isla. She is the tie we needed between us.

“Honey, are you alright?” Kinsley asks, finally pulling away from Isla long enough to look at her face. “You scared me.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I bet you were scared, too, huh?”

Isla nods, and Kinsley gets down on her knees in front of Isla. “I’m sorry you saw what you did, but it isn’t what it looked like, honey. Papa and I, we were having an adult conversation and we were both saying things and reacting badly and... Sometimes, grownups get all scared and flustered, too, you know.”

Isla nods. “I know. Papa explained.”

Kinsley stiffens but doesn’t look in my direction. “Here, put your jacket on, sweetheart. It’s cold and you’ve been out here

a long time.”

She spins Isla around and teases her arms into the coat. When Isla turns back around, Kinsley zips her up and gives her a huge smile. “Feel better?”

“Lots.”

“Good. Are you ready to come home now?”

“Yes.”

Kinsley gets to her feet and takes Isla’s hand. Then, for the first time, she looks at me. Her expression is curiously devoid of any emotion.

I suppose I deserve that. I deserve to be shut out from her thoughts.

“Come on, baby,” Kinsley says, looking at me while talking to Isla. “Let’s go home.”

The two of them lead the way. I follow behind. We walk back to the apartment quietly. Petro sends me a text that he’s left some takeout for us in the kitchen and stepped out to give us space.

When we get upstairs, the smell of Chinese wafts through the Parisian vibe of the apartment. “Why don’t you go wash your hands for dinner?” Kinsley asks Isla.

“Okay,” she says, zipping off down the hall.

When we’re alone, Kinsley offers me a tiny glance, but she averts her gaze almost immediately and walks into the kitchen. She’s pulling out plates and opening containers when I enter the kitchen. She’s tense, I can tell from the rigid way she’s handling the utensils.

“Kinsley—”

“Not now,” she says, turning to me, holding a plate in front of her like a shield. “I just want to have a nice dinner, okay? I don’t want to talk now.”

“Whenever you’re ready,” is all I say.

It’s the least I can do.

KINSLEY

“She’s asleep,” I say, walking towards the couch in the sitting room.

Daniil is sitting on one end, his eyes cast out of the window. When he turns them on me, they look as dark as the sky outside. I sit down at the other end of the sofa and tuck my feet up under me..

“Good. She was tired.”

“Running away will do that to you.”

He just regards me with that impassive expression, wiped clean of human expression. Sometimes, as much as I love him, I just want to shake him. Shake all that armor right off him.

“She said you talked to her,” I nudge. “Explained things.”

“I did. Tried to, at least.”

“Well, she went to sleep happy.” I glance out the window, suddenly forgetting everything I wanted to say before sitting down. It’s a beautiful night. The sky goes on forever, unmarred by buildings, planes, clouds. It’s nice.

“I shouldn’t have touched you the way I did,” Daniil says, breaking the silence.

I sigh. “Daniil—”

“It’s true what I told you, you know. The things I saw. The things I did. The things I let happen.”

“Because he forced you to do them.”

“I could have stood up to him a lot sooner.”

“You were young.”

“I was old enough to know the difference between right and wrong!” he snarls suddenly. His voice breaks in a way that makes my heart do the same. “I was old enough to see my father for what he was.”

I let his words fade into the warm, quiet darkness. “You still think it’s easy to break away from abusive relationships. I believe you were the one who lectured me about that when we first met.”

He laughs hollowly. “I’m sure I did.”

“I’m not saying you’re blameless in all this, Daniil. I’m just saying that you’re not solely responsible for what happened. You were as much a victim as your mother.” I want to touch him so badly, but I’m keeping my distance because watching him flinch away from me is more than I can bear right now. “At some point, you’re going to have to forgive yourself.”

“I don’t want forgiveness. From myself or you or anyone else.”

“So that’s it then?” I ask. “You’re going to punish yourself for as long as you live?”

“Seems fitting.”

“Where’s that gonna get you?” I shake my head. “You’ve been torturing yourself for decades for something that wasn’t your fault, and all you have to show for it is scars that you won’t let anyone close enough to see.”

“Kinsley—”

“Did you mean it?”

He stops short. “Did I mean what?”

“Did you mean it when you told Isla you loved me?”

It takes him a long time to fully process what I just asked him. In the end, all he says is, “You overheard.” Not a question. Just a sentence. More like a death sentence, actually, based on his tone.

I nod grimly as incoming tears I desperately don't want threaten to sting my eyes. "Yeah, I heard the last bit. I wasn't trying to or anything. I got your text and headed over to the park. When I spotted you guys, you just seemed so deep in conversation that I didn't want to interrupt. I didn't mean to overhear. I really didn't. But I did, so now, we're here, and now, I'm asking: did you mean it?"

He doesn't say anything, and I feel myself shrink. Slowly, irreversibly, right in front of his eyes. Pieces of my soul withering away in real time. I manage to hold back the tears somehow, but I don't want to push my luck, so I decide to get away before I lose what little control I have left.

"Okay then," I swallow. "Question answered. I think I'm gonna go and—"

I'm halfway off the couch when his hand shoots out and snares me by the wrist. He's grabbed me this hard before, usually out of anger, but something about it feels different this time. It's not desperate, it's not melancholy, it's—shit, I don't even know. I don't have the words to describe what he is to me right now. What I am to him. All the things that we might be to or with or for each other.

"It isn't a trick question," I say quietly as one rogue tear breaks free and trickles down my cheek. "If you have to think, that's all I need to know."

"I don't have to think about my answer," he says at last. "I know my answer. I just have to figure out a way to explain myself." His eyes are roiling with something. Some more of that baffling thing I can't name. "I'm not good at this, Kinsley. I'm not good with the feelings, and the deep conversations, and the delving into the past. I left it all behind me in a cold, concrete jail cell."

He reaches out and tucks a stray lock of hair back behind my ear. There's a tenderness in him I've never seen before. Every breath, every gesture is suffused with it.

"But I'll go there for you. It might rip me apart every time, but fuck it, you keep telling me that that's what love is about, right? Exposing yourself? Shedding your armor? So fuck it.

Fuck it all. I love you, Kinsley Whitlow. I've loved you since the moment I watched you tumble off that bridge. I love you because you're brave and because you're naive. I love you because you're beautiful, of course, and also because you're broken—but you're broken in ways that match the ways I'm broken, too. We're a fucked-up puzzle, jagged glass with blood on the edges, but it fits. It matches. So if diving in that river was a mistake, then fuck that, too—it was the greatest mistake I've ever made, and I'd do it a thousand times over if I had to.”

When he's done, the only sound in the room is our matched-up breathing and our matched-up heartbeats.

I stroke his cheek with my fingers because I'm pretty sure I might die if I don't touch him. I'm smiling and crying at the same time. It shouldn't be possible to feel this many things at once. But I'm feeling them, every single one of them.

“For a guy who says he's not good at this, you did a pretty good job,” I cry-laugh.

“Well, if it's alright with you, princess, I'd really like to be done talking.”

I nod and grin. “I'll allow it.”

“Halle-fucking-lujah.”

Then he pulls me to him and kisses me. Feverishly, passionately, tenderly. It's overwhelming and it's everything I wanted since the moment I laid eyes on him.

My arrogant monster.

My arrogant mistake.

My happily-ever-after.

DANIIL

I wake up with Kinsley's head on my chest and a weight in my stomach like a boulder. I have a flight out of Lucerne in five hours, which means I need to leave in three.

My time in this impossible dream is coming to an end.

I gently extricate myself and make my way to the kitchen for a strong cup of coffee. On my way there, my phone pings.

PETRO: Yo. I'm outside. Open up, bitch.

I re-route and open the door for him. He's standing there in sweats and a t-shirt, looking like he could use a cup of coffee or maybe just a straight-up IV of caffeine. "Morning, *jefe*."

"Don't talk. The girls are still sleeping."

"You're as cheery as ever," Petro grumbles, trotting after me into the kitchen.

I just grunt and make my way to the coffee pot. I pour two mugs full and slide one over to Petro. "Everything all set to go?"

"Of course. I'm taking my security guard responsibilities very seriously."

"I know you think this job is beneath you—"

"Hey now. That's not what I think," he says convincingly. Then he shrugs. "Okay, I may have felt that way in the beginning. But I don't anymore. It's a privilege to be the one to take care of Kinsley and Isla while you're gone."

“Protect them with your life, *sobrat*.”

He nods solemnly, out of jokes for once. “I intend to.”

I stroke my chin, lost in thought. “I’m gonna marry her, you know.”

Petro nearly sprays me with a mouthful of hot coffee. “Are you alright? Are you having a stroke? If you smell burnt toast, tell me, because that’s a bad sign.”

I smirk. “I’m serious.”

“That’s a worse sign.”

“Once my fucking father is no longer a threat, I’m going to do it.”

He sighs. “Ah. So it could be years.”

Just like that, I’m on edge again. I shake my head. “It won’t come to that. I’ll be back before the year is over.”

“Daniil, I love you, man, but I think you’re—”

“Hi.”

Petro and I both glance to the side as Kinsley walks into the kitchen. She’s still got bedhead, and her eyes are puffy from a good night’s rest, and she’s wearing a pair of ragged pajama bottoms with my t-shirt that’s about four sizes too big for her. She’s never looked better.

She looks between Petro and me like she’s not sure where or if or how she belongs. I make things easy for her by grabbing her by the waist, pulling her to me, and kissing her hard on the lips. She tastes like cinnamon, inexplicably.

She pulls away, blushing slightly. “Good morning to you, too.”

“Aww, aren’t you two the cutest,” Petro coos.

Kinsley’s blush gets deeper as she untangles herself from me and inches towards the coffee pot. “Petro, how did you manage to get coffee all over yourself?”

I throw him a glare and he shrugs. “Um, Daniil told me a funny story. I laughed and spilled coffee.”

I snort. *Idiot*.

“A funny story?” Kinsley asks, turning back around to face us.
“Daniil doesn’t tell funny stories. Can I hear it?”

Petro is starting to look panicky. “You wouldn’t understand it. It’s a private joke. Inside joke. You know, a just-the-guys kind of thing.”

“Right...” she says, looking between the two of us with amused suspicion. I can’t help but laugh—she likes torturing him, if I’m not mistaken. “Well, keep your secrets then. Are you joining us for breakfast?”

“Sure, why not? Unless you wanna do a whole family thing with Isla today. I can make myself scarce if so.”

Kinsley gives him a smile, and it makes me realize that Petro gets to enjoy her company for the next several months and I don’t. It’s not jealousy, not exactly. But it is... something.

Fear, maybe.

“I can make some eggs. And there’s bread I can toast up. Or...” Kinsley says, poking her head into the fridge. She falls quiet as she rummages around in there for a while.

When she reemerges, her face is drawn tight with worry. It’s crazy to me how I can see that in her now. A curve of the eyebrow, the chewing of her bottom lip, and just like that, I taste her fright on my tongue.

“What is it?” I ask.

“When should we tell Isla?” she asks. “About... about what’s happening?”

I feel that boulder in my chest, the one I woke up with, sink a little lower, a little heavier. I sigh wearily. “I’ll go wake her up myself.”

I walk down the hallway towards Isla’s bedroom. Every step feels like I’m getting closer to a precipice that I’m about to hurl myself off of.

I’m leaving. You’ll be alone again. I’ll do my best to keep you safe, but how can I be sure? How can I be fucking sure?

I swallow down all those words I don't want to say and push open her door.

She's stirring when I step in. Yawning, stretching overhead. Her hair is curly and wild and unspeakably beautiful to me. I see so much of her mother in her. So much of my own mother, too. It's a strange feeling, seeing pieces of yourself reflected in another human being. I still can't quite comprehend that we made her, Kinsley and I. We did this.

"Good morning, *dorogaya*," I rumble.

She sits upright and knuckles the sleep out of her eyes. Then she glares at me. I freeze. "Something wrong?"

"You're about to tell me something bad, aren't you?" she accuses, face wrenched in a full pout.

I blink. "What makes you say that?"

"I can see it in your face. You look guilty."

I grimace and pass a hand over my eyes. "You're imagining things. Well, fuck. No, you're not. Yes, I'm going to tell you something you won't like very much. I'm... I'm leaving today, *dorogaya*. I have to go back home and take care of some business."

Isla folds her arms over her chest. "I knew it," is all she says. She's angry, just like her mother. Then it melts and her lip quivers. "I don't want you to go."

Just like her mother.

I sit down on the edge of her bed and cup her foot through the blankets. "I don't want to go either," I tell her, and I've never meant it more. "But I have to."

She sighs. "It's not going to be the same without you."

"You have your mother." Isla shrugs petulantly, and I lower myself to her eye level. "Listen, Isla. Do you remember what I told you yesterday by the pond? Well, I meant it. I love you and your mother, and as soon as it's safe, we'll all be together again. I swear. I swear like I've never sworn anything in my life before. We're a family. And families belong together."



Half an hour later, we're sitting by a quiet little café overlooking the river. Petro is tucking into a breakfast fit for three, and Kinsley and Isla are busy with chocolate croissants and fresh juice.

I, on the other hand, have no appetite. Suddenly, it feels like Lucerne is no longer safe. Like every man lurking alone in the corner might be one of Gregor's soldiers, here to rip away the only things I've ever let myself love.

When Isla and Kinsley go to peer at the bakery display for potential second helpings, Petro kneads me in the arm with his elbow. "Bro, who are you looking for?"

"What if he knows that we're here?" I growl under my breath. "What if he managed to track us down?"

"You're just being paranoid because you're leaving them," Petro replies. "You need to stay calm. If Gregor gets inside your head, he wins."

"Hate to break it to you, but the old fuck has been in my head for two decades straight."

"Well, time to break the cycle, yeah?"

I swallow my newfound fears as Isla and Kinsley return to the table. "Look!" Isla chirps excitedly. "It's like pure liquid chocolate in a cup. Can we come here again tomorrow?"

I smile. "Of course. I'm sure your mom can bring you."

She seems to have forgotten that I won't be here when tomorrow comes. At the reminder, her face drops immediately and she scowls down at her hot chocolate with sudden disinterest, like it's the one responsible for ruining things.

I check the time. I need to be leaving soon. Ten minutes at the most. Everyone seems to be aware of it. All the air gets sucked out of the room and everyone's eyes are on me when I look back up.

“Is it that time already?” Kinsley asks, trying to sound light and breezy and mostly failing at it.

I nod, not trusting my voice.

She gives me a bracing nod in return and glances at Isla. “Sweetheart, you wanna say goodbye to your papa?”

Isla’s eyes well up with tears. Her bottom lip trembles, but she tries desperately to keep it together. When I offer my hand, she ignores it and promptly launches herself into my arms. A bundle of sweetness and lightness, so good and so pure that it’s a miracle I can even touch her without bursting into flames.

I don’t deserve her. I don’t deserve her mother. I don’t deserve any of the things they’ve given me.

But fuck me if I won’t go to the death to defend them.

I lift Isla up and walk her away from the café. She tightens her arms around my neck and I think about all those moments I missed when she was a baby, a little girl. Kinsley was doing all the heavy lifting then. Both literally and figuratively.

And here I am, leaving her to do it again.

“I’m coming back,” I whisper into her hair. “You know that, right?”

She manages a teary smile. “I know.”

I set her down and we both sink to a seat on a nearby bench. Isla rests her head on my shoulder and we just sit there. Greedily soaking up more moments I never thought I’d get.

After a while, Petro emerges from the restaurant. “Hey, kiddo, how about we work ourselves into a sugar coma today?” he asks, handing her the cup of hot chocolate she left behind. “After you’re done with that, we can get ice cream.”

“You’re just trying to distract me because Papa’s leaving.”

“Bingo, and a smart kid would capitalize on that,” Petro retorts shrewdly. “Come on. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Well, maybe once-in-a-week for as long as we’re here,

because I'm a sucker for Swiss chocolate. Matter of fact, I know a place..."

He takes her hand and the two of them walk back towards the apartment building together to give Kinsley and me a moment to say goodbye. She slinks up next to me.

"I have a feeling those two will be fast friends."

"Yeah, well, they're on the same level, maturity-wise."

She smiles and turns to me. That's when I notice the piece of paper in her hand. "I wrote you a letter," she explains. "It's more like a short note, actually, but I didn't want to blubber through saying this stuff out loud just before you have to leave. Read it when you're on the plane, okay?"

"Understood," I say, taking the note. "Now, give me a kiss that'll keep me going until I see you again."

Her smile is both sad and desperately hopeful as she leans up towards me. Her lips meet mine and we kiss for an eternity that ends too soon. She tastes like forgiveness.

And when I finally let her go to turn and walk away, that's what I focus on. That taste.

I hope it lasts forever.

KINSLEY

RIIIIIING.

I jerk upright and make a grab for my phone. But it's not on my bedside table where I thought I'd left it last night. I follow the sound.

"Where the hell is it?" I mutter to myself.

RIIIIIING.

I finally manage to unfurl the sheets and pull out my phone. I'm hoping it's Daniil, but the number's private. I answer anyway, still holding out hope.

"Hello?"

"Hello, is this Ms. Whitlow?"

"What?" The accent is impossibly thick, and I'm still groggy with sleep.

"This is Ms. Whitlow, yes? I am Lolita Binoche, Mr. Talbot's personal secretary."

"I'm sorry, who?"

She actually sighs. "Mr. Talbot, the principal of Lucerne Youth Academy."

I close my eyes in horror. What a horrible first impression to have made. "I'm so sorry. Of course I know who he is. I have a meeting with him today."

A meeting that Petro set up on my behalf when I insisted I wanted to work again while we were away. He'd done all the

research—wouldn't let me within ten feet of his laptop, either—and said that Lucerne Youth Academy was the best school in the city and that he'd arranged an interview with the headmaster, Mr. Andres Talbot.

“That is what I am calling about,” she says irritably. “The meeting has been moved to the Garden Club. Ten o'clock.”

I check my watch. “Ten o'clock? That's in an hour.”

“Do not be late.”

Then she hangs up. Just like that. Doesn't wait for me to confirm or anything. “Goddammit,” I gasp, flinging myself out of bed and running straight for the bathroom.

By the time my morning ablutions are out of the way, I've lost a good fifteen minutes. I trip to my closet, which is only half-full. The rest of my clothes are still languishing in the suitcase.

I'd had an outfit all picked out, but I can't for the life of me remember what it was. “Dammit,” I curse again, and then remember that Petro needs to be up here before I leave so he can watch Isla.

While I continue to fling around my clothes, I call him.

“Mmmyello?” he answers. He sounds like he has a mouth full of baked goods. Probably because he has a mouth full of baked goods. In the thirty-six hours since Daniil left, he's eaten enough pastries to keep Europe stocked for a century.

“I need you to get up here.”

“Mmf. You sound panicked.”

“My meeting with the school was moved up. I have to head over there now. I just checked and the Garden Club is like twenty-five minutes—”

“The Garden Club? That's not where the meeting was supposed to take—”

“Just get up here!” I snap impatiently before hanging up on him. The lady's surly attitude is infectious, apparently. Or maybe I'm just missing Daniil more than I'm willing to admit.

I pick out a pair of smart black pants, a sharp white shirt, and then I throw on my boots. I grab my long black coat and have just enough time to run a brush through my hair before I race out the door.

Petro is standing in the living room, looking much more alert than I feel right now.

“Thanks for being here,” I tell him breathlessly. “I should be back in a couple of hours.”

“Kinsley, wait. Let me first verify that this change is legitimate.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re getting to be as paranoid as Daniil. I got a call from his personal secretary. She’s the most Swiss-sounding person I’ve ever encountered in my life. It’s legit.”

“Kinsley.”

“Don’t ‘Kinsley’ me. I’ve got to go. Can’t be late. Give Isla a kiss for me!” Then I bolt out of there before he can delay me any further.

I manage to hail a cab reasonably fast and I get to the Garden Club just barely on time. I sigh with relief, pay the driver, and stride towards the entrance of the stately Garden Club.

It’s beautiful in that over-the-top, old grandeur kind of way that Switzerland does so well. I imagine libraries full of old men in leather wingback armchairs, sipping expensive brandy and smoking expensive cigars and discussing continental philosophy.

The woman at the reception gives me a critical once-over when I approach her. “I’m here to meet with Mr. Talbot,” I explain.

“Of course,” she says in crisp, accentless English. “Please follow me.”

She ushers me past the main club house. I only get a peek through the smoked glass, but I do spy wingback armchairs and I’m pretty sure they’re made of deep red leather. Guess I wasn’t far off in my imagination.

“Mr. Talbot is right through here,” she says, opening the door for me. She pulls it closed rather harshly as soon as I step inside.

I look back at the door in bewilderment—for as polite and courteous as she was when I arrived, that was an awfully abrupt exit. Then, with a shrug, I turn and face the room.

It’s silent in an almost aggressive way. Like the plush carpet or the wood paneling is actively sucking the sound out of the room, robbing it from my eardrums. Weirdly, it seems I’m alone.

Then a door I didn’t see because it was built flush into the mahogany wall paneling opens on silent hinges. A man steps through. He’s tall, as stately as the building we’re in, with graying hair and strangely perceptive blue eyes.

“Mr. Talbot?” I ask. I hate how my voice sounds in here. Like it’s been stripped of all power. If I want a job at the prestigious school this man runs, I need to get my shit together.

The man shakes his head. “I’m afraid Mr. Talbot can’t make it today.”

I squint as a weird feeling squiggles through my belly. There’s something jarringly familiar about the man. It’s a déjà vu feeling, but like it’s been refracted through a funhouse mirror. A color I know, boxed into a shape I don’t.

“Wh... who are you?” I like my voice even less this time around. If it was timid before, now it’s simply afraid.

The man smiles. It has a sickening tinge to it. “Would you like to take a guess?”

I swallow, the taste in my mouth suddenly acrid and foul. This cavernous library felt so huge a moment ago. Now, it’s as cramped as a jail cell.

It takes me a few tries, but I finally get out a word I’ve been praying I’d never have to say. A name, to be more precise.

“Gregor?”

KINSLEY

Evidently, calling him by his first name wasn't the salutation he was expecting. I get the feeling he's the kind of guy who would prefer if I'd just started crying instead. His lips pucker with displeasure and irritation runs across his eyes.

"Take a seat. I've been waiting a long time to meet you."

I shake my head. "I'd rather stand. Actually, I'd rather just leave."

But of course, the moment I turn towards the door, a man I didn't see when I entered steps in front of it. There's no missing the bulge of the gun at his hip, cloaked by his black suit jacket.

I turn to face Gregor again, scowling. "This is a cheap scare tactic, you know."

"There's nothing cheap about my tactics, my dear," he says with another of those slimy smiles that make my skin crawl. "I did ask you rather politely to sit, and you were the one who got testy. But if you'd like, I can break your legs to help ease the transition from standing. Is that what you'd prefer?"

Gritting my teeth, I sink onto the blush pink, high-backed sofa with bronze studding. He's seated opposite me in a black leather armchair, one leg crossed primly over the other.

"Can I offer you anything to eat or drink? The club has a lovely selection of pastries. No? Well, do let me know if you change your mind."

“This is not a casual little chit-chat,” I point out. “Kindly stop treating it like one.”

“No, of course not. I’d call it more of a family reunion.”

Fear shoots up my chest. The shock of coming face to face with Gregor is receding fast, and in its place is the horrifying realization of what this means. I’m here alone with him, and Daniil is all the way in the States. Even if he catches a flight right this minute, it’d take him half a day at absolute best to arrive.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“What do you want with me?” I croak out.

He smiles. Apparently, I’ve asked the right question. “I want you to make my stubborn son see sense.”

“You want his Bratva, you mean.”

Gregor’s expression turns cold and impatient. “If I wanted what’s his, I would simply take it. This is about building, not stealing. He proved himself by venturing out on his own and constructing the Vlasov Bratva from the ground up. But he has a duty to the Semenovs, too. A duty he cannot forsake, as much as he’d like to try.”

“I think you killed the duty in him when you slaughtered his mother and his unborn brother.”

Gregor raises his eyebrows. “He told you the story, did he? Surprising.”

“He told me everything.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“Believe what you want. I believe Daniil.”

Gregor strokes his chin absent-mindedly. “He’s a capable man, to be sure. The last decade has proven that. But he can be... emotional. Erratic. He’s prone to bouts of sentimentality and conscience.”

I wrinkle my nose at his casual sociopathy. “He’s stronger for it.”

“Pah!” Gregor waves a hand like he’s batting away the idea itself. “Your opinion is immaterial. You are not Bratva. You do not understand our world. Our family.”

“*Family*,” I scoff in the same disgusted tone he used. “What the hell do you know about family? You call yourself Daniil’s father, but you were never a father to him. You were a slave driver, a drill sergeant. You were—*are*—nothing but a monster.”

“He’s brainwashed you well, I see. Kudos to my boy.”

“He did nothing but tell me the truth,” I retort.

Gregor cocks his head to the side. “You’ve got quite the mouth on you.” He rearranges his legs, plucks an imaginary piece of lint from his flawless navy suit, and muses, “My wife had the same spirit. She wasn’t quite as mouthy—she knew better—but she did fight back once upon a time.” I can feel the goosebumps erupt on my skin. I’m not sure I want to hear the rest of it, but Gregor doesn’t seem to give a shit what I do or don’t want. “I quickly disabused her of the notion that she had a right to a voice.”

“Did it make you feel more like a man?” I ask, unable to keep my mouth shut. Apparently, my self-preservation skills needed some work. “To beat a woman half your size and half your strength until she miscarried?”

He smiles. If anything, this one is even colder and more inhuman than the last. “No. It didn’t make me feel anything at all.”

I shudder. “Excuse me?”

“The crocodile doesn’t feel for the fly,” he says, as if that encapsulates everything neatly. “I needed a woman to make me a son. She did her duty, and for that, she received the comfort of a luxurious home. But that’s as far as my kindness extended.”

“He hates you, you know,” I blurt suddenly. Not because it’s the smart thing to do or the brave thing to do, but solely because I want to find something—anything—that will hurt this cold-hearted son of a bitch. “You thought using his mother

against him would create a heartless monster just like you, but it backfired.”

Gregor is unfazed by my vitriol. “I’ll admit, my plan for young Daniil veered away from my control. But I see it only as a detour in the road. The path remains in place for him to walk, and I will see to it that he finds his way back there. I have built a legacy for my son. He will inherit all once I am no more.”

“You threw him in jail.”

“All he had to do was swear subservience to me and he would have been free.”

“The fact that he never did should tell you something.”

“*Au contraire*, little spitfire—it tells me that he is the man I always hoped he would be. With a few glaring... weaknesses.” His pointed glance at me conveys his meaning perfectly well. “Of course, those can be ironed out in time. He’s still a boy in so many ways.”

I feel sick to my stomach. I’m trying not to think of Isla, because God only knows what this sick fucking monster might have planned for her, but it’s getting harder and harder not to feel that bone-deep fear that only a mother knows.

How can a parent be so callous? So cruel? The man sitting in front of me brought a person into the world who is beautiful and kind and brave. A person who loves me. Who showed me how to swim in a cold, cold river. Who saved me from myself.

And he doesn’t even recognize the good he did.

Fine. If he won’t... then I will.

“He’s not going to give you what you want, you know.”

“Oh, I think he will,” Gregor says with a smug smile. “And you know why? Because I’m going to illustrate one of my lessons to him. I’m going to show him why I always preached strength over sentimentality. Why loving a woman is as useless a thing as a man can do.”

I can feel my fear unspooling inside my chest.

“He made himself weak by showing me how much he cared about your safety,” Gregor continues. “A child is one thing—that is blood. And blood means family. Heirs. Legacy. A woman? Well, that is another thing entirely. She is... expendable.”

Is it weird that I can't feel my legs? I can feel my heartbeat and I can hear my breathing, but it's like they belong to someone else.

No one's coming for me. At least not anytime soon. Petro thinks I'm at an interview for the next few hours, and Daniil is half a world away. He might as well be on the moon.

I'm all on my own. Trapped in the palm of the man who killed his own wife in cold blood, and sent her severed fingers to the prison where he'd locked up his only son.

“You look pale, my dear.” Gregor's crocodile grin stretches another tooth wider. “How about something to eat now?”

DANIIL

My feet can't carry me fast enough.

In between the pompous columns, beneath the gargoyle-laden arch.

Through the atrium and down the hall.

Faster and faster I go, my breath coming in harsh, painful spurts, like daggers in my chest. But they could be literal blades slicing between my ribs and shredding my insides to ribbons and I still wouldn't stop, still wouldn't quit, still wouldn't give up on the woman who changed my world.

I see the man's silhouette through the smoked glass door. Without breaking stride, I throw myself right into it.

Fuck a doorknob; I'm coming for blood.

The explosion of glass is ear-splitting. It rips open my clothes and my skin, but I don't give a shit, because I get what I'm after at the same time.

The man who was standing guard at the library door collapses beneath me. The biggest shock of his life, I'm sure. It's also the last shock, because we've barely hit the ground before I'm grabbing one of the loose shards of glass and cutting his miserable throat from ear to ear.

Then I stand, dust myself off, and look across the room...

Where my father is seated next to Kinsley.

Gregor is looking back at me with dark eyes, but there's a smile on his face. "Son, you decided to join the party."

“There is a dead body on the floor,” I snarl back. “Definitely seems like your kind of party.”

I glance at Kinsley. Her cheeks are flushed with frightened color. I want to tell her it’s okay. That I won’t let anything happen to her. That I’d fucking *die* before I let something happen to her.

But first things come first.

“Sit,” Gregor says. “Let’s talk.”

“Not one conversation in ten years and now, I see you twice in only a few short months,” I growl. “I’d say we’ve reached our quota.”

“I disagree. We have much we need to discuss.”

“Actually, I’m done talking.”

“You really think I’m going to let the two of you just walk out of here?” Gregor asks in a bored voice. “Sure, that useless fuck on the carpet is dead, but the place is surrounded with my men.”

“Your men won’t have a leader to follow when I walk out of this room,” I tell him bluntly.

Gregor just laughs. Cocky and full of pride. “Have we already moved on to the exchange of threats?”

He doesn’t look the slightest bit threatened, and I know why. He’s secure in the knowledge that our shared blood will protect him. All those hard-taught lessons he drilled into me when I was too young to question them—that’s what he’s counting on.

He thinks he made me. And to be honest, he did.

But then Kinsley *unmade* me.

And that’s the best fucking thing that ever happened in my life.

Gregor hasn’t moved since I walked in. I wouldn’t be surprised if his blood was frozen solid. The man isn’t human. He just reclines in that chair, legs crossed, coolly at ease.

I know what he's doing: calling my bluff. All I have to do is attack. He's old and frail; I'm stronger than he ever was. I could kill him in pure silence and no one would know until Kinsley and I are far from this wretched fucking club.

His smile widens. I feel as though I can read every thought running through his head.

That's right, boy: I created you. I still have a hold on you after all this time. You ran when you should have sat still and done as you were told. But even now, when the chance to get your revenge is right here for the taking... you can't do it.

"I think we both know how this is going to end," he sighs at last.

"This is going to end with Daniil's bullet in your fucking head," Kinsley cries out.

She's panicked. I can feel it, but her fear is as much for me as it is for himself.

"You haven't domesticated your bitch yet, I see," Gregor remarks dourly.

I flinch in his direction. "You will not speak about her like that. Ever."

His eyebrow arches. "Are you commanding me, son?" he asks. He's still smiling, but the smugness has been replaced by heat. The kind of heat that comes off the earth's core. Lava. The fucking sun.

"I am simply telling you how things will go."

The smile remains plastered on his face. "You sound like me."

I'm not unaware of that fact, and I fucking hate it. I ran as far and as fast from him as I possibly could. But there's no outrunning the blood in my veins. There's no outrunning the memories he seared into my mind.

He's part of me.

The worst part is that he knows it. That—more than the men circling this building, more than any other card he could play—is his true power over me.

“You get it now, don’t you?” he says quietly. “It took you long enough—more than a decade—but you finally get it. You are not just my son, Daniil. You *are* me, in a way you cannot ever escape. So go on, kill me if you’d like. It will make no difference. I will live on through you. You are just a vessel I poured myself into. *Vlasov*.” He spits the name like it disgusts him. “You thought that taking that silly bitch’s name would change the fact of what you are. Pah! It’s time to stop this foolishness. Accept it, boy. You cannot kill me. Because killing me is killing yourself. Killing me is—”

Gregor stops mid-sentence, his eyes going wide and his skin paling visibly. He looks down at his chest. Blood spreads across his white shirt, drenching it with its rich burgundy color.

Then I step back and release my fist, and the shard of glass I used to pierce his heart drops to the floor and shatters.

He’s not dead yet. I predict he has about twenty more seconds of life left, maybe less. Which is just exactly enough. Enough for him to realize that he’s dying. To realize that he’s lost.

To finally grasp that he didn’t succeed in molding me in his image.

His final arrogant mistake.

He slumps down in his seat as I stand over him. Every cough brings up bubbles of red froth, choking him on his own blood. It’s ironically poetic.

“You could have saved yourself, you know,” I spit down at him. “You were right: I couldn’t have killed you before. But I’m not the man you made me. Not anymore. I’m the man *she* made me.”

I turn from him before I see the light fade from his eyes. I don’t need to see him die; it’s enough to know he’s going to.

Instead, I turn my attention to the one thing that matters.

Kinsley is standing a few feet away, watching me, unsure of what to do, how to react. She’s got tears staining her cheeks, but I doubt she even notices.

“Daniil...” she whispers.

“Come here, *sladkaya*.”

She bolts into my arms, her arms clasp tight around my waist. “Are you okay?”

I breathe her in. She smells like lavender. She smells like salvation. And my lips still buzz with the day-old taste of her forgiveness. It shows no signs of disappearing. Not now, not ever.

“You think I’m here because I had some grand plan, right?”

She laughs tearfully. “Don’t you always?”

“Not this time,” I whisper into her hair. “I just got lucky. I flew home, but when I landed, I just sat there for a long, long time. I knew that everything I had to do—my Bratva, my soldiers, my empire, all the things I spent ten years building—all of it was waiting for me. But I couldn’t leave you. I couldn’t leave our daughter. So I said fuck the plan and fuck the Bratva, fuck it all. I’m staying with you. If we had to run forever, I’d have been okay with that. If we’d had to hide forever, I’d have been okay with that, too. But I wasn’t letting you go. I made that mistake once, Kinsley. I’ll never do it again.”

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