



Crown

SAVAGE EMPIRE BOOK FOUR

MICHELLE
ST. JAMES

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CROWN

Savage Empire Book Four

Michelle St. James

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“Kira Baranov Antonov.” Kira whispered the words as she looked out over the river snaking below the warehouse’s giant second-floor windows.

It was something she’d taken to doing in the month since Lyon had been kidnapped — since he’d been taken from her.

She used all her names in these dark moments: her first name because it was given to her by her parents and represented her truest self, her family name because it represented the strength of the Baranovs, leaders of the bratva since before it was brought to America, back when the fighting was done on the streets of Russia, everyone willing to kill for the few scraps available during the Cold War.

And Antonov, the name that had become dearest to her because it was given to her by her husband.

The Lion.

“Where are you, Lyon?” she murmured. Chicago was still chilly at night in May, even inside the warehouse that was Lyon’s headquarters, and her breath fogged the window.

She missed him with a fierceness that stole her breath, that made her feel as if her heart was being crushed in the fist of a giant, unseen hand. She didn’t allow herself to think about it

too often. The pain was overwhelming and she might find herself doubled over, or even sinking to her knees, great sobs pulled from her throat until she thought she might lose consciousness from the sheer agony of it.

It wasn't good for the baby.

That was her focus now: the baby growing inside her and rescuing Lyon from the hands of the men who'd taken him during their second wedding.

Then, making them pay.

She spun the rings on one finger of her left hand, then drew a breath for courage as she slid both of them off.

She'd had to add the one on top — an old ring that had once been slightly too big for her finger — to keep her wedding band in place. She hadn't been eating enough, and she'd panicked when, a couple of weeks after Lyon's abduction, her wedding band had fallen to the floor in the shower.

She'd scrambled to retrieve it and had only then noticed the inscription on the inside of the band.

For my malen'kiy sokol. Ya obozhayu tebya.

For my little falcon. I adore you.

It had brought her to her knees, dripping and sobbing in the shower, her chest heaving. She didn't know why Lyon hadn't told her the inscription was there when he proposed. Maybe he'd wanted it to be a surprise. Maybe he'd just wanted her to find it on her own, an Easter egg they would both smile over together.

Whatever the reason, it had almost broken her.

She'd added the second ring — a tighter fit now than her wedding band — to keep the gold band in place. Gradually, her feelings had changed when she dared to look at the inscription.

Now, she felt only determination.

She was going to find her husband and bring him home.

She slipped the rings back on her finger and touched a hand to the gun strapped to her thigh under her dress. She never went anywhere without it now, and its weight brought her comfort.

If Vadim's men came for her first, she would be ready.

“Almost ready?”

The voice behind her made her jump, but she knew immediately it was Alek. It was always Alek these days. Since Lyon's kidnapping, he'd rarely left her side. He drove her everywhere and had even moved into the penthouse, hardly necessary since she had Rurik there, and Annie too, although her dear friend was more comfort than protection.

She turned to face him, the pool table used by the men during their downtime between them. “How much longer?”

His face fell. “I don't know.”

It wasn't what she wanted to hear. They'd spent the last month assembling the men, Lyon's innermost circle and others, soldiers drafted from the streets.

It wasn't ideal. Normally, each man would have been high-ranking and experienced, carefully vetted by Alek and approved by Lyon, but Lyon had just gotten his team together when he'd come under threat, first from Musa and then the unseen enemy from Russia they now knew was Vadim Ivanov.

There weren't enough men in the inner circle, not for the kind of rescue they would need to stage when they finally figured out where Vadim was keeping Lyon.

If he was still alive.

No, she wouldn't think about that.

“Any updates on the locations?” she asked Alek. She had to focus on saving Lyon. He was alive. She would have felt it if he was dead, because then a part of her would be dead too.

Besides, his body had yet to be discovered, and anyone who killed the Lion would make sure the bratva knew about it. How else to step into Lyon's shoes?

“We’ve eliminated the old theater,” Alek said.

She chewed her lip. She should have been happy — eliminating one of the locations where Vadim might be keeping Lyon meant they were narrowing the field, but it also meant one less chance of finding him. What if they eliminated them all?

What if they never found him?

“You’re sure?” she asked.

He nodded. “We saw Javier Rodriguez coming and going yesterday. Turns out he was running a little business through the theater.”

“This isn’t cartel territory.” Kira was stating the obvious. Thanks to her father’s tutelage and her own determination to be more than a mafia trophy wife, she knew every player in Chicago’s criminal underworld.

But so did Alek, and they both knew Javier Rodriguez was an up and coming leader in the Sandoval cartel.

“Yeah, he knew that, and he knows it even more now,” Alek said, his voice ominous.

In any other situation, Kira might have been worried. There were rules governing their actions with and against the other criminal organizations in Chicago: the Syndicate, the cartels, the Irish. It was the only way they were all able to operate without turning the city into a bloodbath. It was rare for anyone to break protocol.

No one made money in a turf war.

Alek knew the rules, and Rodriguez had been breaking them. Whatever message Alek sent would have been appropriate for the infraction of doing business on bratva territory.

“Good,” Kira said, moving around the pool table and toward the door where Alek stood.

He stepped aside as she approached, understanding that she was ready to leave. It was one of many things she loved about Alek — the way he anticipated her every move, his

ability to be silent during long stretches, his knowledge of every facet of the bratva and their business interests, which allowed them to speak in a kind of shorthand even though they'd interacted very little before Lyon's kidnapping.

She understood now why he was Lyon's closest friend, the one person Lyon had trusted when he was planning his takeover of the bratva.

She moved past Alek into the hall and stopped in Lyon's office to get her coat. Her husband's scent lingered in the air — the musk of his cologne and the scent of his skin that she would have known blindfolded — and she had to suck in a breath at the wave of longing that filled her body.

She started to pull on her coat. "Eliminating the theater puts us down to two possibilities."

Alek stepped into the room and held the coat while she slid her arms into it. She was small for being six months pregnant, but her movements already felt awkward and clumsy. Her center of gravity was shifting, and she would sometimes have to catch herself in a stumble when she stepped off a curb.

"Yes," he said, waiting while she grabbed her bag.

It had taken them nearly a month to narrow their possibilities to three. They'd known Vadim was holding Lyon somewhere in West Town. Holding the Lion captive would require allies — Russian allies — and West Town was teeming with Russian immigrants, some of whom would be eager to do the bidding of one of Mother Russia's own.

"Any change on the hospital or the tunnels?" she asked, turning out the lights and heading for the walkway that was suspended over the floor of the factory below.

With the theater out of the running, the only possibilities they had left were a defunct psychiatric hospital and the abandoned freight tunnels that ran under the city.

"A little more activity around the hospital," Alek said.

She stopped walking. "Why didn't you say something?"

She tried to keep the note of accusation out of her voice. No one wanted to find Lyon as much as her and Alek.

“I’m not sure it means anything yet,” he said.

He didn’t want to get her hopes up. That’s what he wasn’t saying.

They’d narrowed the field by making note of the increased activity surrounding the theater, the hospital, and the West Town entrance to the tunnels.

Nothing was certain, mostly because they had no context for the activity: no one had been paying those locations any notice before Lyon was taken.

But of all the places in West Town, they seemed to have the most unusual foot traffic — men in suits, some in leather jackets that appeared to bulge with weapons, all of them coming and going at odd hours, none of them members of the Antonov bratva.

“Is it time to send in the men?” Her heart raced at the thought. They’d held off showing their hand by launching an attack. They were already spread too thin to send the kind of army they would need to save Lyon, let alone three armies to three different locations.

“Not quite yet,” Alek said as they made their way down the metal stairs to the factory floor below. “Let’s give it a couple more days.”

“But Lyon...” She couldn’t say it, didn’t want to release the words to the air, as if doing so might turn them into reality instead of her darkest nightmares.

“I know,” Alek said.

They both thought about what was happening to Lyon. Kira knew it from the darkness that crept into Alek’s blue eyes when they spoke of her husband, the way he too stopped himself from speaking certain words aloud.

Lyon was being tortured. There was no doubt about that. Kira couldn’t allow herself to think about the things they might be doing to him, the torture tactics pulled from the KGB

playbook, tactics her father had only told her about when she was old enough to bear the horror of it.

Thinking about Lyon — her Lyon — being subjected to such atrocities brought her perilously close to taking the pills stashed in her bathroom. The doctor had said they were safe for the baby, but Kira didn't want to take any chances, and she'd promised herself she would only use them if she truly couldn't bear it.

“Kira...” Alek's voice was low and soft through the darkness of the factory floor, the old machines still covered in drop cloths, unused since Lyon's purchase of the warehouse as a headquarters, back when he'd been lining up the pieces of his bid to take over the bratva.

She'd been one of those pieces then — a mafia princess with no power, with nothing but a name and knowledge known to no one but her and her father.

She stopped walking and looked up at Alek.

“I know it's hard,” he said. “But it's going to get harder. I hate to tell you that, but it's true.” She could tell from his voice that he was telling the truth, and she wondered if it was because, like the other men, she'd gained his respect by leading one of the armed gunmen at their wedding away from the other wives and their children, or if it was because she'd stepped into Lyon's role in spite of her pregnancy, because she was determined to bring him home alive. “What we do next will be very important. We can't afford to make a mistake.”

She took a deep breath, exhaled slowly. He was right. Being closer to finding Lyon might make them reckless. They couldn't afford that.

Lyon couldn't afford it.

“I know,” she said. “You're right. I just can't bear to think about him...”

She couldn't say the words, didn't want to imbue the images that woke her up screaming in the night with any more power than they already had.

“I know,” he said. “But we're going to get him back.”

She nodded and started again across the warehouse floor.

She fought against the urge to beg Alek to promise Lyon would be alive when they brought him home. To promise he would be whole. That he would still be her Lyon.

It was in irrational impulse. The truth was, no one knew what condition Lyon would be in when they finally found him.

One thing she did know was that they were running out of time. She felt it like a ticking clock in her bones. She didn't know why Vadim would keep Lyon alive this long, but she knew with certainty that every day brought him one step closer to death.

They had to make a move. And soon.

“Alek,” she said. He stopped with his hand on the door. “Five days. We can't wait any longer. Lyon can't wait any longer.”

His face was obscured in shadow, but she heard his resigned sigh, saw him nod. “Five days.”

Kira waited while he murmured a few words to the guard stationed outside the warehouse, then she stepped through the door and headed toward the black Rover parked there.

She would be reasonable, give Alek a little more time to confirm Lyon's location.

But if they couldn't, if it didn't happen in five days, she would turn the city upside down to bring him home.

Lyon forced himself to stay awake. The men would be coming back soon, and he needed every second to think.

Not about Kira and their baby. No, those thoughts were reserved for the worst of his torture. When Vadim's men were doing their best to break him, when he thought he couldn't take it anymore, that's when he thought of them.

Of her.

It was only her face and voice that got him through those moments when he considered letting Vadim's men kill him.

And he could let Vadim's men kill him. On more than one occasion, death had been so near that the men had to stop their savage work, check his vital signs, and reluctantly leave him to recover. During those moments, Lyon could feel death like a promise.

Relief, surrender.

Peace.

Then he would think of Kira's lovely face, the way her green eyes sparkled when she was being mischievous, the way her lips slowly morphed from a frown to a smile when he finally made her laugh.

He thought of their future — of the baby they would raise to be fierce and true, of nights wrapped in each other's arms and mornings smiling at each other over coffee and the mundanity of daily life that hadn't seemed mundane since she'd stepped into his world.

When he got truly desperate, his hold on the world weak, he replayed every moment of their past. Not just the time since they'd been married, but all the times he'd seen her as a little girl, when he'd been both mesmerized by her and filled with resentment at the way she seemed to look through him.

He would walk through each moment as slowly as he could, continuing to the moment they'd danced at their wedding reception, the moment he'd held her in his arms on the dance floor and realized she was truly his, and onto all the moments when she tried to fight what was between them, tried to make clear she would never give herself to him.

He even relived the agony of her flight to Orcas island, the torture of being without her each day and night, the misery of believing she'd never had feelings for him.

Anything to retreat from the pain his body endured at the hands of Vadim's men.

Sometimes he dreamed up toasts about them, conjuring Kira's voice.

To the men who ruined our wedding day, may they never know a love like ours.

To Vadim Ivanov, may he be forced to eat Russian food for the rest of his days.

To the mindless thugs beating up my husband, may they never again know the touch of a woman.

Lyon would find himself laughing hysterically, maniacally, one of the only times Vadim's men hesitated in their work, unsettled by the jokes known only to Lyon.

But when the men left, when they allowed Lyon a couple of hours of sleep in the chair that had been his home since they'd taken him, that was when he thought of escape.

He braced himself for pain and felt for the screw at the back of the metal chair. He had to stretch against the zip ties that confined his ankles and wrists, and he winced against the pain as his movements strained his beaten and battered body.

But there it was, on the back of the right side of the chair, where the metal legs were screwed to the metal seat. He wished it had been on the left — the way his hands were crossed and tied meant he had to work the screw with his left hand — but beggars couldn't be choosers.

He was relieved to find the screw still in place. He'd been working it since shortly after he'd been tied to the chair, and it had taken him days (weeks? He didn't know, time didn't exist here) to loosen it enough to start turning it. The going had been slow at first, the screw barely turning at all with his limited range of motion. His fingers had bled, and his wrists as he strained against the bounds of the zip ties.

He hardly noticed, and his captors surely didn't notice the additional blood.

He was already covered in it.

Now the screw was loose. Very loose.

He was trying to gauge how close he was to its end, but it was a delicate operation. He couldn't unscrew it too far lest it fall to the floor, but he needed it close enough to release that he would be able to choose his time wisely in using it.

He used his index finger to turn it ever so slightly, closing his eyes to get a better feel for it.

Yes, it was close. Very close.

A couple more turns, maybe four or five. Then he would have it in his hands. He would use it at mealtime, the only time they released him from the zip ties. It meant eliminating an extra man when Lyon was unrestrained, a man he thought of as the Mountain, a reluctant homage to his Herculean body and an expression that was as unyielding as granite — but it wouldn't do any good to have possession of the screw if his hands were tied.

He hadn't figured out the rest of it yet, although reason told him he would attack the closest man first, drive it into his eye or neck, take his gun and use it on the others.

Quietly, he hoped.

He would take their guns too. Then he would run, although he had no idea what was on the other side of the steel door to the cavernous room that was his cell. He knew only that the walls were old concrete, that the place smelled of damp and mold and stale air.

He forced himself to focus, straining to turn the screw again, groaning as the zip ties dug deeper into his bleeding wrists.

He was surprised they'd kept him alive this long. Vadim Ivanov could surely have taken his territory by force. After all, how much resistance would his men pose for a man like Vadim? And how difficult would it be to overtake all the revenue streams that were part and parcel of the bratva, especially with Ivan's help?

He didn't understand any of it: Ivan's betrayal, Vadim's sudden appearance in Chicago, or the delay in killing him.

And it didn't matter. All that mattered was escape. All that mattered was getting back to Kira, delivering on the promise he'd made to protect her and their baby.

He felt the shadow of dark thoughts that plagued him when he was at his weakest.

What if they'd already hurt her?

What if she was dead?

He pushed them away before they could swim to the surface. It was the way of madness. He simply refused to believe anything had happened to her. She had Alek.

And Rurik.

His men would protect her.

It was enough. It had to be.

His resolve hardened as he turned the screw again, then froze as the sound of footsteps made their way through the door.

They were coming again. Not with food — they'd brought him two cold burgers not long before — but with the instruments of his torture. He'd already lost two of his back teeth and several nails on his fingers and toes. He was almost positive his nose was broken, and they'd probably cracked a rib or two as well.

They'd sliced his thigh with a blunt knife, leaving behind a gaping wound that was almost certainly infected. He hadn't been able to open his left eye for days (weeks?), and he expected them to start in on his fingers and toes any minute.

He carefully moved his hand away from the screw, not wanting to bump it when it was so close to coming loose.

Next time. He would remove it the next time he got the chance.

Then he would get out of here, back to the only woman who'd ever made him want to live. And if they'd hurt her, if they'd laid so much as a finger on Kira's head, Lyon would burn down the city looking for them.

Then he would tear them apart with his bare hands.

It was a satisfying thought, and he didn't realize he was smiling through his cracked lips until he heard one of the guards say something in Russian.

The poor bastard has lost his mind. He's smiling.

Lyon kept smiling. He was looking forward to killing these men on his way out.

Kira breathed a sigh of relief when she and Alek finally stepped out of the elevator into the penthouse. Being at Lyon's headquarters and working with the men required armor. The bratva was hardly a progressive organization. The very reason she'd agreed to marry Lyon had been to give herself a chance at retaining even some of the power her father had earned as pakhan.

Appointing her in his stead hadn't even been an option.

They'd both understood the reality of their situation, Kira had been raised at her father's knee, knew the inner workings of the bratva better than almost any man who might take it over, but to keep the Baranov name from dying, she'd needed a husband.

Stepping into Lyon's shoes even temporarily required a leap of faith on the part of the men — and unwavering strength in herself. She didn't allow herself to hesitate while in their company, didn't allow herself to doubt, but the further along she got in her pregnancy, the more tired she seemed to become. Coming home was like divesting herself of heavy armor after a long day on the battlefield.

"Goodnight," Alek said as she took off her coat.

“Stay,” she said, placing a hand on his arm. “It smells like Annie has something cooking in the kitchen.”

Kira had offered him a room at the penthouse, but he’d declined, citing security redundancy since Rurik was already there.

He shook his head. “No, thank you. I have an appointment.”

It was what he almost always said, and she suspected it was a lie. Annie had spotted him sitting in the Rover in the penthouse’s parking garage late one night while returning from a date with one of her many suitors.

“Please,” she said. “It will make me feel better to know you’ve had a good meal.”

He hesitated. “All right.”

They made their way into the kitchen, following the sound of Annie’s cheerful chatter. Kira smiled to herself imagining Zoya rolling her eyes, pretending to be annoyed by Annie’s bright nature and constant stream of conversation when deep down Kira knew she was grateful for the company.

“Ah, there you are,” Zoya said, spotting Kira as she emerged from the hall with Alek. “You’re getting later and later.”

“There’s so much to do,” Kira said.

And there was. Not just reconnaissance on the sites where Lyon might be held prisoner, but management of the bratva’s day to day operations. There were never enough hours in the day, and it was always tempting to stay just one more hour.

What was the point of being in the penthouse anyway? She hardly noticed the wall of glass anymore, the terrace on the other side of it, the sweeping views of Lake Michigan. The penthouse was an homage to luxury, to Lyon’s determination.

But it was nothing without him here.

“Sit,” Zoya said. “It’s not good for the baby, all this work.”

Annie set a glass of seltzer in front of Kira at the table, then smiled flirtatiously at Alek. “Hello, Alek. Will you be joining us for dinner?”

“Yes, I think so,” he said stiffly.

Kira suppressed a smile. It was always fun to watch Annie work her magic on hardened cynics, and none so much as her husband’s best friend and right-hand man.

Annie clapped her hands together, her dark eyes bright with excitement. “Oh, good! I’m trying a new recipe. You can tell me how you like it.”

“It smells amazing,” Kira said. She had no idea what Annie was cooking, but she smelled garlic and rosemary and cooking meat.

Her mouth began to water.

“It’s just steak,” Annie said, “but I’m braising it in rosemary butter, and I made some roasted potatoes with crushed garlic to go with it.”

“Oh my god,” Kira groaned.

Annie laughed. “I’ll just finish it up.”

Kira felt a pang of loss. She’d never been much of a cook before her marriage to Lyon — Lina had done all the cooking at her father’s house — but she’d been enjoying cooking for Lyon before he’d gone missing.

She hadn’t cooked a meal since. She couldn’t bear it. Couldn’t bear to make herself a nice meal, to enjoy it, when Lyon was out there, being hurt by Vadim Ivanov’s men.

It was easier when Annie cooked. She or Zoya would put the food in front of Kira and smile expectantly, and Kira would be forced to eat out of appreciation, forced to smile and make conversation when all she really wanted to do was curl up and sleep until Lyon came home.

“Anything new?” Annie asked from the oversize kitchen island where she was plating the food.

“We’ve eliminated one of the three possibilities,” Kira said.

Annie froze, a skillet held in one hand. “That’s good right?”

“It doesn’t feel fast enough,” Kira said, her despair getting the better of her. Lyon’s absence sat on her chest like a lead weight. She could hardly breath around it.

“That’s understandable,” Annie said. “And it isn’t. Not really. We all wish Lyon had come home weeks ago. But this is progress. You’re closer than ever before.”

“I think we need wine,” Zoya said, bustling to get wine glasses. She sniffed and gestured at Kira’s glass. “That... water with bubbles will not make you feel better.”

“Kira is pregnant,” Annie reminded Zoya.

“You think I do not know this?” Zoya asked, her accent thickening with annoyance. She set to work uncorking a merlot. “A little wine won’t hurt the baby. In Russia, women drink vodka. Babies are fine.”

Kira wasn’t so sure that was true anymore, but it seemed ill-advised to argue, so she let Zoya pour her a tiny amount of wine. The doctor had said it was okay in moderation, and Zoya was right: Kira was in need of something stronger than grapefruit seltzer.

She lifted her glass to Alek.

“Wait for me!” Annie said, rushing over to pour herself a glass. “I want in.”

They all raised their glasses, even Zoya, who had gifted herself with a very healthy pour.

“To the Lion, may he tear every man apart on his way out,” Kira said.

“Here, here,” Annie said.

The clinked glasses and Annie went back to work in the kitchen. A few minutes later, Rurik joined them, and they spent the next two hours talking over Annie’s delicious dinner.

Kira sipping her wine slowly, savoring every drop. She was relieved they didn't talk about the timeline for rescuing Lyon. Kira could feel the pieces moving into place, knew they would have to formulate a plan.

But for now, it was nice to be at the dining table with the people who had come to be her friends, her family, in Lyon's absence. It was a strange group to be sure, but they gave Kira something to look forward to at the end of the day, gave her a reason to keep getting up in the morning, to keep eating for the baby, to keep moving.

By the time Kira said goodnight to Alek at the elevator — another offer to stay in one of the spare rooms, another offer declined — her eyelids were heavy.

She said goodnight to Annie and Zoya, arguing over how best to clean the stove — again — and walked slowly up the suspended staircase leading to the second floor.

She turned into the first room rather than continuing to the end of the hall and the bedroom Lyon had given her when they'd first been married. She'd been sleeping in his room, the room she'd just begun to think of as theirs, since the day he was taken from her.

The sheets still smelled like him — she refused to wash them — and she chose a piece of his clothing from the walk-in closet to take to bed with her each night.

She got ready for bed, climbed between the sheets with one of the sweatshirts he wore on his morning runs, and turned off the lights with a sigh.

The baby was kicking and moving inside her, and she placed her hand on her stomach and stroked the little bumps and knocks, wishing Lyon could feel them too.

“You're strong,” she murmured into the darkened room. “That's because your father is a king. No one in the world is stronger, and no one in the world can keep him from us.”

It was her version of a bedtime story, and something she repeated every night in the dark. Sometimes she told their baby stories about when Lyon was a little boy, how he was

angry and tough, how he never let anyone push him — or her — around. She laughed, recalling how she'd thought him a little bully, a young man with no refinement, something that would later turn out to be patently untrue.

Other times, she told the baby stories about the early days of their marriage, like the time Lyon had almost sputtered in indignation when he found out she'd orchestrated a brunch with some of the women, or the time she'd arranged for him to meet with the leaders of the Syndicate, a rival criminal organization.

When she was feeling really brave, she spoke of how she fell in love with him, recounting all the times she'd caught him smiling when he wasn't aware she was watching, all the times she caught him looking at her. She told the baby about the book he'd gifted her in Lake George the night after they'd slept together for the first time, the way his gaze had felt soft on her face.

By the time she started drifting off to sleep, the baby had calmed its movements.

Kira lay in the dark, thinking of Lyon, wondering where he was, if he was okay, if he was thinking of her at that very moment.

Then she thought about the fact that they'd narrowed the possible locations to two (she wouldn't allow herself to consider the possibility that they were wrong about both).

What would her husband do in this situation?

“Talk to me, Lyon,” she murmured as she fell into sleep.
“Tell me what to do.”

She woke with a start, her heart pounding, words blowing though her mind like a strong wind.

Come now, malen'kiy sokol. I am ready.

It was Lyon's voice, his nickname for her.

Little falcon.

The baby was kicking furiously, as if he or she had heard the message too.

She put her hand on her swollen stomach. Had it been just a dream? Or was Lyon out there, sending her a message, answering the questions she'd asked as she fell asleep.

Come now, malen'kiy sokol. I am ready.

She didn't know, couldn't know, but whether it was a message from Lyon or her subconscious desperate to do something or a message from some unknown guide in the universe, it felt right.

There was no indecision as she swung her feet over the bed and reached for her phone.

The phone only rang once before Alek's voice came on the line.

“Are you okay?”

“Fine,” she said. It was still black beyond the shades in the bedroom. She hadn’t even looked at the time before dialing Alek’s number. “Call the men to the warehouse.”

“Now?” Alek didn’t seem surprised, only curious.

“Now,” she said. “I’ll be ready to leave in fifteen minutes.”

They were spread thin, yes. Too thin for two separate and simultaneous rescue attempts.

She would get buy-in from the men. Ask them if they were willing to take the risk to save their pakhan.

To save Lyon.

The answer would be yes. She had saved their wives and children during the invasion at the wedding, had proven herself a capable leader in Lyon’s absence.

It had only served to cement the respect and loyalty Lyon himself had built among the men before he’d been taken.

They would agree. She knew it.

And she would do what she could to get them help.

She dialed another number as she dressed, one even Lyon didn’t know she had.

“What’s happened?” The voice was low and gruff.

“I’m sorry to call so late, Roman. I need your help.”

Whatever it took, she was going to get her husband.

Roman Kalashnik looked out at the city from the passenger seat of the Jaguar F-Type. Pedestrians swarmed the sidewalks like ants and dodged cabs in the crosswalk, all while staring at their phones. He watched several of them step over a man bundled in a trench coat and propped against the exterior of a trendy restaurant while his friend and right-hand man Max tried to inch the Jag over for an ambulance.

Roman hated Manhattan.

Here, everyone wanted to see and be seen, all while pretending not to see the people who actually made the city run. The noise of cabs honking and sirens blaring was so incessant, its residents hardly noticed it anymore. It was a city populated almost exclusively by the wealthy climbers looking to become wealthier and the poor who made it all possible.

There was no middle ground.

So why are you here? Again?

It was an easy question to answer, although he had no desire to answer it.

It was her. The woman in the coffee shop.

Ruby.

“Want me to wait outside?” Max asked from the driver’s seat as he pulled next to the curb.

“Yes,” Roman said. “I won’t be long.”

Even as he said it, he knew it might be a lie. In the past, he’d stayed for more than an hour just to watch her.

“4pm with your father,” Max said.

“I’m aware,” Roman said.

He opened the door and stepped onto the pavement. He appreciated Max’s reminder not to lose track of time, but there was no need. It would be impossible for Roman to ever forget a meeting with his father, Igor Kalashnik.

Igor had made sure of that.

Roman crossed the strip of pavement in front of the coffee shop without bothering to make sure no one was coming. Whether because of his height — he was 6’4” — or the purpose with which he walked, the crowds parted for him like the Red Sea, just like always.

A couple seconds later, he was opening the door to ROASTED, a generic coffee shop in the Flatiron District. He stepped inside its fragrant warmth, the smell of freshly brewed coffee and warm blueberry muffins filling his nose.

He scanned the counter, caught a flash of burgundy hair, and got in line.

The first time he’d come here had been an accident. A meeting with a reluctant supplier — guy over on East 23rd who delivered custom Italian furniture to a high-end store on Park, and to Roman’s men, when Roman demanded it — had left him with bloody knuckles and the kind of coiled energy that made him distrust himself. He’d told Max to follow him in the car while he walked it off and had been drawn to ROASTED by the smell of coffee.

But it was the woman at the counter who had drawn him back again and again.

He inched forward in the line and caught the sound of her voice, the shower of her laughter like soft rain.

“Good call,” she said to someone up ahead. “They’re always better warm.”

He couldn’t see who she was talking to, but he wanted it to be him, wanted to be the recipient of her soothing voice and gentle laughter.

He wasn’t a patient man.

He wasn’t a lot of things.

Most of the time, he sent Max into coffee shops and takeout restaurants while he sat in the car and conducted business, but Roman was drawn to the coffee shop over and over again, standing in long lines, waiting with the other patrons for overpriced coffee and stale baked goods.

Waiting to talk to her.

A harried mom holding the hand of a small child ordered an oat milk-latte-something-or-other while the tow-headed child peered at Roman from behind her legs.

He held up his hands like claws and pretended to make a scary face, then stuck out his tongue.

The child smiled shyly at him and hid his face behind his mother’s legs, before peering out again.

Roman felt the tug of longing. He enjoyed children, but he would never be foolish enough to have them. His own upbringing — his own father — had made that impossible.

The woman paid and moved down the counter with the child to pick up her coffee.

Roman stepped in front of the register, and there she was: Ruby, according to her name tag.

She smiled. “Back again?”

Warmth spread through his chest. She remembered him.

“Can’t stay away,” he said gruffly. He hadn’t expected to do anything but order a coffee he would throw in the trash outside the shop, maybe a stale muffin he would give to Max when he got back to the car.

Her eyes — an alchemical mixture of blue and green — sparkled. “Is it the bad coffee or the processed baked goods?”

It's you.

“Definitely the bad coffee,” Roman said. Was he smiling? The expression felt strange on his face. “The processed baked goods are just a bonus.”

She laughed — he'd already memorized the melody — and looked down at the register. A piece of dark hair streaked with burgundy fell out of her ponytail, and he had to resist the urge to tuck it behind her ear.

She really was beautiful, with creamy skin and refined cheekbones that were almost too sharp for her delicate features. His gaze locked onto her full lips, and he wondered what it would be like to kiss her.

“Pick your poison,” she said, pulling him away from the fantasy.

“I'll have a large black coffee and...” He looked at the glass case filled with pastries, wanting to prolong his contact with her, “an apple strudel.”

“One bad large coffee and a processed apple strudel coming up,” she said, tapping the register.

He smiled as he watched her move around the tiny area behind the counter. She maneuvered gracefully around her coworker — a young-ish guy with a goatee and a handful of face piercings — as if she were a dancer in a strange ballet.

She was small but solidly built, with full breasts and a tapered waist that flared to pillowy hips. He imagined having her thighs locked around him, then looked quickly away, feeling like a pervert.

She placed the pastry and coffee on the counter and stretched to get him a cardboard sleeve for his cup. His eye caught on her wrist, a bruise darkening the delicate skin there.

Something like fury rose in his chest before he tamped it down. That wasn't an I-bumped-into-something bruise.

That was a some-dickhead-grabbed-my-wrist-hard bruise.

Someone had hurt her.

“That’ll be \$8.64,” she said with a smile.

His gaze snagged on her eyes, and for a split second, he felt something pass between them. He wanted to demand to know who had hurt her, to promise it would never happen again.

Then he got ahold of himself.

He didn’t know this woman, was projecting all kind of traits onto her that she likely didn’t possess, was idealizing her in a way that was inappropriate and quite possibly creepy.

He tapped his card against the machine, tipped 50%, and picked up the coffee and strudel. “Thank you.”

She smiled. “You too.”

He took the coffee and strudel and made his way through the throng of people toward the door.

Outside, he dumped the coffee and strudel in the trash and looked for Max. He spotted the Jag halfway down the block — a construction crew was setting up in front of the coffee shop — and headed that way, forcing the woman from his mind.

He had bigger things to think about anyway. Namely, the shit show in Chicago and his promise to help Lyon Antonov secure the territory. He was using his own men, the few he trusted not to talk inside the New York organization.

And they couldn’t talk, because there would be hell to pay if it ever got back to his father that Roman was involving himself in the Chicago turf war. At best, he would see Roman’s decision to help as an act of foolishness.

At worst, he would see it for it was — a trade: Roman helped Lyon secure the Chicago territory, and in return, Lyon would help Roman seize New York from his father’s leadership.

It would be a deadly game once Roman made the opening move. The longer he kept his father in the dark, the better.

He reached the Jag and slid into the passenger seat. “Let’s go.”

“Back to Brooklyn?” Max asked.

“Back to Brooklyn.” It was almost time for the meeting with his father. The scars on his chest and arms burned at the thought of him, and he heard his father’s voice in his mind: *pain is a reminder of what you can endure.*

Roman had endured plenty, mostly at the hands of his father.

But soon, the tables would turn.

Lyon was ready. The screw was clutched in his left hand, ready to impale the eye of the guard closest to him. After that, he would have only seconds to get to the other two before they recovered their wits — but he would get to them, in spite of his most recent injuries, which now included a dislocated right shoulder.

It wasn't ideal. He was in excruciating pain and didn't have the freedom of movement to fix it himself. It meant he would only have one hand available for his attack on the first guard, but there was nothing to be done about it.

One way or another, he'd endured his final round of torture at the hands of Vadim's men.

But as he listened to the footsteps approaching the metal door, he immediately knew something was different.

He'd expected more than two guards. By his count, it was time for his daily meal, which meant three guards.

But no, he wasn't imagining it. There were four sets of footsteps, maybe even five.

Fuck.

Taking on three guards with all his injuries was one thing.

Four? A stretch.

Five? Not likely.

He was a fighter, but as much as he hated to admit it, he was also a human being, and human beings had limits.

Even the Lion.

He gripped the screw tighter, hoped he hadn't been wrong about the meal, that they weren't going to give him another round of beatings while screaming questions about his operations. He didn't know if he'd be able to hang on to the screw through more torture, which was why he'd timed his attainment of it with mealtime.

He watched as the metal door screeched open. The two regulars entered — he called them Chuckles and Psycho, one had a face like stone and the other enjoyed his torture a little too much — but when it came time for the third guard to step in, the one who also watched while he wolfed down his food unrestrained, another man entered instead.

And this was no guard.

The man was younger than Lyon by a decade, and from the cut of his trousers, custom-made shirt, and the handiwork on his leather shoes — not to mention the \$50,000 Piaget Skeleton watch — he was very high up on the food chain.

He approached Lyon slowly, but Lyon caught the air of hubris in his swagger. His dark hair was fashionably styled, and he wore the hint of a goatee that did nothing to hide his youth and inexperience.

Still, something cruel shadowed his dark eyes. It wouldn't have bothered Lyon by itself — Lyon had known many cruel men and understood that many thought him to be one — but there was a manic shine there too, something that spoke of instability, and even worse, insecurity.

“Well, well, well,” the man said. “If it isn't the Lion.”

He exaggerated Lyon's nickname, said it in a kind of comical hush as he circled Lyon's chair. Lyon caught an

unusual scent on the man, something that felt vaguely familiar but that Lyon couldn't place.

He clenched his fists tighter, made sure the screw wasn't visible.

"Everyone was so scared of you." The man laughed. "Even my father. But you don't look very scary now."

His father? Was this Vadim's son?

Lyon tried to shake loose the details Damian Cavallo had uncovered on Vadim. It was difficult. He'd been in this room with only occasional trips to the bathroom for weeks (months?). He'd lost track of time, of many of his memories except for the ones involving Kira that he replayed over and over again.

But yes, he thought he remembered one child, an illegitimate son born late in Vadim's life, although he couldn't recall the man's name.

Samuel? Spartak?

No, it was Sergei. That was right. Lyon was almost sure of it, and he remembered reading that Sergei was beloved by Vadim in spite his illegitimacy.

"What's the matter?" Sergei Ivanov had circled back to the front of Lyon's chair. "Cat got your tongue?"

Lyon stared up at him without speaking.

"My father thinks you're close to breaking." Lyon watched as Sergei opened his jacket, removed a long, sharp hunting knife from a sheath strapped to his side under his jacket. "But I feel like you could use a little help."

He flipped the knife over and around in a complicated set of moves he'd clearly practiced, then touched the tip of it to the index finger on his other hand.

Blood immediately beaded on his fingertip, and Lyon noticed that all of his fingertips — the ones Lyon could see in the dim light of the room — were scarred from similar tests.

“My father is sentimental about women and children, hesitant to do what must be done.” Sergei paused, tearing his eyes from the blood on his fingertip to look at Lyon. “My vote is for letting me play with your pregnant wife. She’s very pretty.”

Lyon willed himself not to respond, but the roar that grew inside him was instinctual. He strained against the zip ties on his hands and feet, the chair shifting on the concrete floor.

Sergei studied him. “I’d heard your marriage was arranged — that was smart, by the way — but now I wonder if there’s more to the match.” He looked down at his knife. “That would be... fortuitous.”

Lyon shut thoughts of Kira behind a steel door in his mind. He couldn’t afford to react, to show Sergei the depth of his horror at the thought of someone hurting Kira.

Kira couldn’t afford it.

If he thought of her, his fury — his fear — would overtake him.

As pakhan, Lyon made a point never to harm a woman or child. The man in front of him had no similar compunction, no honor. There was the light of a sadist in his eyes. Hurting Kira would only be more appealing to him if he knew that it would drive Lyon mad.

And it would drive Lyon mad.

Sergei approached him slowly, the soles of his expensive shoes clicking on the concrete floor. “I’m here to help you,” he said soothingly, raising the knife to Lyon’s chest. “To show you what awaits your bride, the mother of your child, if you don’t tell us everything about your operation. You may even thank me later for this gift.”

Lyon suppressed a scream as Sergei made the first cut.

This time he didn’t think of Kira.

Kira walked to the edge of the pavement outside the warehouse and gathered her thoughts. The sky was crystalline overhead, the rising sun casting a net of shimmering glass onto the surface of the river. She watched as a barge loaded with containers made its way to the Port. Its lumber was surprisingly graceful in the water, the surrounding buildings — factories and warehouses mostly, some of them abandoned — strangely beautiful in the warm light of the sun

She drew in a breath, relishing the peaty smell of the river and the cool spring air. The men were already inside, as evidenced by the many cars parked on the pavement behind her.

They'd gathered because they'd been called by Alek, and today they would decide whether to honor Kira's wishes and breach both the hospital and the tunnels or whether they would play it safe and wait until they could narrow the sites to one.

Much of their decision rested on what Kira said to them today. She had to table her own fear, stuff it down until no vestige of it remained. Otherwise, the men would sense it, shaking their own confidence, making them doubt the merit in taking the risk of rescuing Lyon now when so much was unknown.

She couldn't allow that. She needed them to go in willingly, to see it as the only course of action.

She heard footsteps crunching behind her, knew they belonged to Alek, because no one else would dare approach her during such a private moment.

“Are Roman's men here?” he asked next to her.

“Not yet,” she said, still watching the barge. “I told him to wait for my word. No sense sending reinforcements if our own men don't come on board.”

“They will,” Alek said.

She could only hope he was right. “Let's go.”

She turned away from the river, and they walked side by side to the warehouse. Alek keyed in the code, then stepped aside for her to enter before him.

It was something she'd had to get used to in recent weeks: always having someone at her back, someone watching her. She'd had security when she'd lived with her father — she had been the pakhan's daughter after all — but the bratva had been relatively peaceful during her father's reign.

Lyon had been under assault since the beginning, and she'd learned the hard way that being his wife meant she — and everyone she loved — was a target too.

The men were assembled on the factory floor, which made sense given their number. The upstairs lounge was big enough for Lyon's inner circle, and they enjoyed gathering there, playing pool and drinking when they weren't working.

This crowd would never have fit upstairs. What was a relatively small contingent given their goal of rescuing Lyon was still nearly twenty men, too many for the lounge.

She nodded gratefully at Markus, who had been at the warehouse to greet the men. Kira understood what Lyon had seen in the dark-haired giant. With Alek by her side 24/7, Markus had become indispensable, taking over many of the field duties once assigned to Alek.

A low murmur sounded from the men as they conversed, but it came to a stop as they realized Kira was in their midst. The respect they'd shown her since the wedding when she'd led the armed gunman away from their wives and children had taken some getting used to. It wasn't the way she'd planned to gain a foothold in the bratva when she'd married Lyon.

No one was more surprised than her to realize that she'd give it all back if it meant Lyon was safe and in charge again.

She walked to the front of the assembled crowd, her heels clicking on the concrete floor of the factory warehouse. The morning sun shone through the high factory windows, dust motes dancing in the light, but the space was so cavernous the edges of it were still filled with shadows.

She looked out at the sea of faces staring at her for leadership and felt a moment of panic. Maybe she wasn't up to this after all. She could be sending some of these men to their deaths. Could be creating widows and fatherless children.

But no. They could not allow Vadim Ivanov to take over the bratva. It wasn't just the money they would lose, the power. She'd read enough about Vadim to know that he was devoid of loyalty to the men in his employ, that he still favored tactics used by the KGB during the Cold war.

Worse, he had a sociopathic son bent on making a name for himself, one who'd been arrested at least twice and had been briefly committed to an institution in his early twenties.

These men and their families were safer under Lyon's leadership. She could only hope they agreed.

"Good morning," she said, forcing her voice steady, making sure it carried through the crowd. "Thank you for coming so last minute."

They murmured their acknowledgment and she continued.

"As you know, we've been trying to figure out where Vadim Ivanov is holding your pakhan, my husband, Lyonya Antonov. We'd narrowed the possibilities to three. Those three are now two. It had been my intention to wait until we could be sure where he was being held, but I no longer believe that is

wise.” She paused. “I won’t lie to you. We don’t know for a fact that Lyon is at either of these locations. It’s possible we’ll breach them only to find them empty, or worse, to find all of Vadim Ivanov’s men staging from these locations. Either way, we’ll almost certainly be outnumbered if we split into two groups, even with the additional help I’ve procured from New York.”

They knew Ivanov’s men were staging from somewhere, because there had already been reports of them making inquiries into Lyon’s holdings, harassing some of the businesses under protection of the *bratva*, hijacking their trucks, vandalizing buildings. She’d considered leading with this as an argument for rescuing Lyon, then decided against it.

She wouldn’t lead with fear. They respected Lyon’s leadership. Appreciated the respect he showed them and their families, the increased pay they’d received under his rule.

They knew what was at stake if Vadim took control.

“Which is why I leave this decision to you,” she continued. “It’s your risk to take or refuse. No man will be punished for opting out of it. I know what I’m asking of you, of your families, and I won’t fault any of you for doing what you feel is best. You have my word.” She made eye contact with as many of the men as possible. “You’re here because I trust you, because *we* trust you. That won’t change should you decide this is a risk you’re not willing to take.”

She exhaled. Whatever they decided, she’d done all she could.

“I’ll leave you alone to discuss,” she said. “Take all the time you need.”

She wasn’t even halfway to the stairs when a voice rang out behind her.

“When do we leave?”

The screw had become part of him. He'd been holding it so long — through so much — that he couldn't remember what it felt like not to have it. It bit into the skin of his palm, but the sensation was only vaguely felt through the wounds that covered his body.

He had to move.

He was falling into complacency, could feel the will leaving his body. The X cut into his chest by Sergei had done something to him, as if the last of his determination had leaked to the floor with the blood that was dried and crusted on his torso.

Also, he was tired. He didn't dare fall asleep. If he fell asleep, he would drop the screw, and then he'd never get out of here. Never get back to Kira and their baby.

So he'd stayed awake, trying to console himself with the thought that he had the screw.

That he would make them all pay.

Sergei Ivanov, included.

Sergei Ivanov, especially, for the crime of threatening Kira.

He'd been allowing himself to think of Kira more often since Sergei had left. She wasn't his weakness, she was his strength, and he used his desire to return to her as fuel to stay awake.

To live.

It was almost time for them to bring him food.

Unless they were going to kill him.

But, no. Vadim wouldn't have sent his son in to try and crack Lyon if he'd been ready to kill him, although the fact that it hadn't worked might push him over the edge.

He couldn't afford to think about it, couldn't afford to believe it would end that way. Despair was already too close, taunting him from the shadows of his damp concrete prison like a siren.

If he gave into despair, this nightmare would soon be over. He would die, would be able to let everything go of this world, but then he would never see Kira again, never meet their baby.

That was unimaginable.

He would fight.

His head snapped up at the sound of footsteps on the other side of the steel door. They were the slow and steady footsteps of his captors, his tormentors — three of them.

Which meant it was mealtime.

They would free him to eat and use the bathroom. Then he would make his move.

He gripped the screw tighter as the door swung open.

Kira paced the waterfront surrounding the warehouse, aware of Alek's presence a few feet away. That he was here was a sacrifice. He hadn't said it, but he wanted to be with the men currently rescuing Lyon, not here, babysitting her.

It was a sentiment she understood. She didn't want to be here either.

Her helplessness made her angry, and she turned to look at Alek. He stood with his gun drawn, a few feet away from the track she'd been pacing in front of the river.

"You should be there." She heard the note of accusation in her voice and hated it, but she couldn't help it.

His expression remained impassive. "No, I shouldn't. Lyon would have my head if I left you unprotected and we both know it."

"There are other men who can —"

She was stopped short by the shaking of Alek's head. "Lyon wouldn't think that was good enough."

He was right. She knew he was right. This wasn't the first time they'd had this conversation in the past twenty-four hours.

“I hate this,” she said, all the bitterness seeping out of her.

“I know,” he said, his voice warmed with sympathy.

It was the helplessness that was killing her. The men they’d managed to scrounge together were right now, at this very minute, staging an attack on the two sites where Lyon might be held prisoner.

And she was here, at the warehouse by the river, under protection like some kind of Victorian damsel.

“Have you heard anything?” She’d asked the question far too much in the past hour, but she couldn’t seem to stop herself.

Alek made a show of looking at his phone, even though they both knew he would have heard it if someone had called or texted.

He slipped it back in his pocket with his free hand, his other hand still on his weapon. “Not since they said they were going in.”

Her stomach roiled, the baby kicking as if he or she knew what was at stake.

She resumed her pacing, her gaze drawn out to the sleeping warehouse district, the barges making their way lazily down the river, the lights of the Port reflected in the inky water.

She took a deep breath and grasped for something to think about, something that didn’t involve the possibility of Lyon being found dead or not at all.

Something that didn’t make her want to scream.

But all she could think about was Lyon. Their early weeks together had been fraught with hatred and the kind of blinding passion she’d never experienced with a man. Their push and pull had only made her want him more.

His stubbornness and ambition were a mirror to her own, but slowly, they’d come to a place of affection. More than that. She’d fallen in love with him. Then, her father had been murdered and she’d been overcome with guilt. In her grief,

she'd fled the city, leading Lyon to believe she'd never loved him.

She'd thought she was doing the right thing, but it had only perpetuated Lyon's distrust, and when he'd had her brought back to Chicago, it had taken weeks and more than a little humiliation to break through his hardened exterior a second time.

She'd finally done it, and she'd been more optimistic than ever when Lyon's traitorous mother had appeared, and then Vadim's men at the wedding that was supposed to be an affirmation of their love.

A shrill ring cut through her thoughts, and she spun to look at Alek, who was already reaching for his phone.

"Yeah?"

She could hardly bear the ensuing silence.

"You're sure?" he said into the phone.

"Come back to HQ." He slipped the phone in his pocket and looked at her. "He's not at the hospital."

"And the tunnels?" she asked.

"Nothing yet," Alek said.

She exhaled. "So he's there."

He has to be, she thought.

Alek said nothing.

Lyon held the screw in his fist, trying not to make it obvious he was holding something while he ate the lukewarm deli sandwich. His stomach turned, but he forced himself to eat.

He felt like he could murder the three men who watched him with nothing but the fuel of his rage, but he'd been surviving on one meal a day for weeks (months?). He couldn't leave anything to chance. He needed to be honest with himself if he was going to get out of here, and the truth was, he was weaker than when he'd arrived. He had no idea where they were keeping him, had no clues beyond this room. There were likely more guards beyond the steel door, and he might have to run once he escaped, possibly for a long time if they were holding him outside of the city.

He needed all the strength, all the fuel he could get.

The guards — Chuckles, Psycho, and the Mountain who came when they untied Lyon's hands to eat — made jokes in Russian. Lyon caught snippets while he listened for cues about their next move.

The urge had been overwhelming to drive the screw into Psycho's face when he'd handed Lyon the sandwich, but that would have been foolish. His feet were still bound. Even if he

hit the man's carotid artery, the other two guards would be on him in seconds.

He needed his feet to fight the remaining two men.

To escape.

He finished the sandwich and watched as the stone-faced man he called Chuckles came toward him. His movements were unhurried.

The guards had gotten lazy.

It happened to the best of them, which is why Lyon rotated his men in these situations. It was human nature to let one's guard down when one felt safe, and what could be safer than being in a room with a man whose hands and feet were bound? A man who was beaten and cowed? Who'd so far made no attempt at escape?

Chuckles was right next to him, his balding forehead glistening, the stench of his sweat causing the sandwich to sour in Lyon's stomach. He forced himself to breathe and handed Chuckles the sandwich wrapper.

He tossed it aside, muttering something in Russian Lyon couldn't make out. Then he withdrew wire-cutters from his pocket.

Lyon's heart pounded. They were taking him to the bathroom.

Chuckles crouched to cut the zip ties from around his ankles. It was almost time.

Lyon was ready.

But just as the guard reached for Lyon's ankles, footsteps sounded outside the door — and not the slow and steady sound of his captors shuffling back and forth outside the room that was his prison.

These were the footsteps of more than one man.

And they were running.

“Chto eto za khren'?” Chuckles said to Psycho, who was already turning to the door.

What the fuck is that?

Gunfire rang through the building.

Adrenaline surged through Lyon's body as he realized what was happening: they'd come for him.

His men had come for him.

More gunfire sounded outside his room, followed by the sounds of men shouting in Russian.

Chuckles rushed to the door, a look of alarm on his fleshy face, the only expression Lyon had ever seen there.

Lyon fought against a surge of frustration at the binds still restraining his feet. There was no help for it. He could either wait here like a sitting duck and hope his captors didn't put a bullet in his brain when they realized they were under assault, or he could make the best of the situation and work with what he had.

It was an easy choice. He didn't do sitting duck.

He used his body weight to rock the chair. It teetered for what felt like forever before starting the long fall backwards.

Lyon lifted his head on the way down, wary of being knocked unconscious by the fall to the concrete floor. It still hurt, the impact jarring his battered body, agony tearing through his dislocated shoulder, but it was a vague notion, a curiosity in the back of his mind.

The men hadn't been watching him, their attention focused on the gunfire growing louder and closer to the room.

But they noticed him now.

The third guard rushed over to deal with him while Psycho and Chuckles unholstered their weapons and flanked the door.

Lyon moved fast, using his freed hands to slide the zip ties around his ankles off the chair legs. He got to his feet just as the guard reached him, his hand on his weapon.

He was too late. Lyon drove the screw into his neck and pulled, felt the rending of flesh as the steel tip dragged down the length of the man's throat.

The blood was a scarlet fountain, deep red and spurting onto Lyon and across the concrete floor while the guard clutched at his neck, his eyes wide with shock, the gun slipping to the floor.

Lyon bent to pick it up and aimed at the two men standing by the door, their eyes confused by the turn of events, their attention split between the chaos clearly erupting beyond the door and the fact that Lyon was now free and armed with one of their weapons.

Their confusion was brief, but it was all the time he needed. He raised the weapon in his hand and fired at Psycho, who hadn't yet managed to aim his own weapon at Lyon.

The bullets hit him in the chest, and he slid to the ground.

Chuckles had gotten further — his weapon up and trained on Lyon — when Lyon fired.

The bullet hit him between the eyes, but not before he got off a shot of his own. Lyon felt the sting of it in his good shoulder and charged for the door, weapon raised.

He stood against the wall next to it, listening.

It wasn't much help. There were people running and shouting, more gunshots, but it was impossible to determine what was going on beyond the door.

And it didn't matter. He was free. He had a gun.

He would shoot his way out alone if necessary.

He opened the door and stepped into the hallway. A large, broad-shouldered man with a scar that ran the length of his face was running down the hall, his weapon drawn. Lyon didn't recognize him, but when he spotted Lyon, he hesitated, then kept running the other way.

Lyon continued down the hall, his weapon pointed outward. This was a shoot-first-ask-questions-later situation. Lyon wasn't taking a chance on not having time to draw his weapon, not when he was so close to freedom.

The hall was curved brick rising to a barrel ceiling. The gunfire echoed, bouncing off concrete and brick, and the

familiar smell of damp assaulted his nose. He turned a corner and spotted old railway tracks leading to more tunnels.

He was in the freight tunnels that ran under the city.

He kept going, slowed down to take the next corner, and nearly tripped over a body.

And this one he recognized.

It was one of the men on Oleg's crew. Lyon didn't know him well, but he'd seemed like an ambitious, loyal soldier.

He was also too young, too inexperienced to be here, trying to rescue Lyon.

"Fuck," Lyon muttered as gunfire erupted around the corner, only feet from his position.

He didn't know if the younger man was alive, but he wasn't leaving him behind.

He looked at the concrete wall and braced himself for the coming pain, then charged at it with his right shoulder.

It popped back into place with a torturous click, and Lyon stifled a scream, fighting against the blackness encroaching on his vision, willing it to clear before someone happened on him in the tunnel.

It hurt like a motherfucker, but even this pain was better than the pain of a dislocated joint.

When he felt reasonably sure he could continue, he bent to pick the man up. The cuts on his chest protested, and he felt a fresh rush of hot blood trickle down his abdomen.

He used his left arm to throw the younger man over his shoulder, glad the kid was slight, and repositioned his weapon, then turned the corner toward the sound of the gunfire.

He almost tripped over another body, but this one he didn't recognize, and when he lifted his gaze, he saw another man standing at the end of the hallway.

The man had a gun aimed at Lyon, but a second later he blinked in astonishment. "Lyonya?"

It was Rurik.

“It’s... it’s me.” Lyon’s voice sounded strange to his own ears. He’d hardly spoken since he’d been taken prisoner. The only sound to erupt from his mouth had been screams on those occasions when he couldn’t hold them back anymore.

Rurik glanced behind him, then raced toward Lyon.

“They’ve got him,” Alek said.

Kira stared at him across the pavement outside the warehouse. “They’ve... got him?”

“He’s alive,” Alek clarified. “And they’ve got him. He was in the tunnels.”

Kira’s knees nearly buckled, and her arms flew out to try and grab on to something. There was nothing there, but a second later, Alek was at her side, steadying her by the elbow.

“Oh my god...” He was alive. Lyon was alive.

She stumbled toward the warehouse where she’d left her bag.

“Where are you going?” Alek asked her.

“To Lyon. I’m going to Lyon.” She didn’t know where he was, where he would be in an hour, but wherever it was, she would be there too.

“Kira.... wait.”

She stopped and looked at him. “What are you doing, Alek? We have to go.”

“He...” Alek took a deep breath. “He doesn’t want to see you. Not yet.”

She froze. “What do you mean?”

“He needs a doctor. He wants to go to the Lake Forest house and wait for Anatoly, clean up a little,” Alek said.

Anatoly was their doctor, the one they called when they didn’t want to involve police or hospitals, which was most of the time.

“Then we’ll go to the Lake Forest house,” she said, her voice turned to ice. She wouldn’t think about the other thing Alek said.

He doesn’t want to see you...

She saw the rare moment of hesitation cross Alek’s features before he spoke again.

“Rurik said Lyon’s fucked up,” Alek said. “He doesn’t want you to see him this way.”

And then she understood. Her husband was the Lion. No man had ever beaten him.

At anything.

Even during the years when he’d been forced to be brigadier on the streets, a station far beneath him. Even during the years when he’d been assigned to Yakov Vitsin’s security detail, a station even further beneath him.

Back then, it had looked like he’d been beaten, but he’d been biding his time, moving the pieces into place to take over the entire organization. She’d been one of those pieces, but now she was his wife in every sense of the word.

“We’ll give them a few hours,” she said. “Then we’re going to Lake Forest.”

She understood that he wouldn’t want her to see him weak and beaten. She would honor his request.

To a point.

Then she would go to him and prove that she loved every part of him, that he didn't have to be the Lion for her. She would remind him that no other man would have survived what he'd surely been through at the hands of Vadim Ivanov.

That he was a king because he had.

"Why don't we wait until he calls for you," Alek suggested.

"Because," she snapped, "for a month I've wondered if my husband is alive or dead." She drew in a shuddering breath, forcing herself to be calm. "And because I want him to know he doesn't have to hide any part of himself from me."

She was embarrassed by the intimacy of the confession. She and Alek were friends brought closer by Lyon's abduction, but she'd never spoken of anything deeply personal to her husband's best friend and right-hand man.

He nodded slowly. "All right. What do you want to do until then?"

"Get the men back here. Order a feast, drinks, whatever they want. Give them all bonuses. Big ones." She started for the car. "I'm going to the penthouse so I can gather some things for my husband."

Lyon stayed in the shower until the water ran cold. When they'd first arrived at the Lake Forest house, his mind had been a jumble of noise and memory: the gunfire echoing off the concrete inside the tunnels, the look on Sergei Ivanov's face when he'd cut into Lyon's skin with his knife, the sound of screams that were his own.

He'd thought he was going mad.

So he'd shut it all down, tucked it away in a dark corner of his mind with a very tight-fitting lid. By the time he hit the shower, his mind was blissfully numb. As long as he stayed here, under the spray, he wouldn't have to think about what had happened to him, wouldn't have to explain it to Rurik or Alek or anyone else.

Wouldn't have to explain it to Kira.

His heart ached at the thought of her, but he hadn't thought twice about ordering Rurik to bring him to the Lake House first. He'd vowed to protect Kira and their baby. Instead, he'd let Vadim's men take him on their wedding day, forcing her to run and cower like the guests who'd come to watch them reaffirm their vows.

Then he'd left her alone for more than a month.

Five weeks. That's how long Rurik said Lyon had been kept prisoner.

More than once — when he'd been bored, when he'd been trying to stay awake with the screw in his hand — he'd tried to guess how long he'd been imprisoned.

His estimates were always different, but the most he'd ever guessed was three weeks.

It had been the worst kind of torture to think of Kira alone for that long. Worse than having his fingernails and toenails pulled. Worse than Psycho's meaty fists cracking through his broken ribs. Worse even than Sergei's knife slicing through his skin.

But it hadn't been three weeks. It had been more than month.

More than a month that she'd been left unprotected. More than a month of her pregnancy and the growth of their baby.

It was too much to contemplate. He turned off the now-icy water and stepped from the shower, glad Kira had left towels at the new house when she'd been preparing for the wedding.

He dried off carefully, not wanting to reopen his wounds, especially the ones on his chest. He'd had Rurik call for Anatoly, the doctor the bratva kept on retainer for those occasions when discreet medical attention was required. Lyon would have him tape his ribs, set his broken nose, see to the rest of his injuries. Then he would figure out how he was going to make Vadim and his psychopath of a son pay for what they'd taken from him.

From Kira.

He looked at his clothes, filthy and rank, piled on the floor of the bathroom and realized he didn't have anything else to wear. The thought of putting on the clothes he'd been tortured in was abhorrent. He would have one of the men run out and buy him something to wear until he felt strong enough to go to the penthouse, to face Kira after failing her so completely.

He wrapped the towel around his waist and opened the door to the adjoining bedroom. The ensuite was supposed to

be his and Kira's primary bedroom when they moved into the Lake Forest house. It was where he'd kept her for three days to teach her a lesson after she'd run to Orcas Island.

The smile that teased the corners of his mouth felt strange. It had been over a month since he'd smiled with anything other than deranged malice, but it was impossible not to do so remembering his wife's fury when he'd had her brought back to Chicago.

She'd been incensed, full of fire.

He'd never been so happy to see anyone in his life.

The primary bedroom was the last to undergo renovation, and the bed still sat against one wall, albeit without sheets and blankets. He didn't care. He was tempted to lay on the bare mattress and sleep for a year.

But he needed clothes, and he needed to get a status update on the business.

He would set Rurik and Alek to work getting the things he needed. Then they would figure out how to find Vadim and his men.

How to make them pay.

He was heading for the door when it swung open. He stopped in his tracks when Kira entered the room, looking brisk and businesslike with a stack of clothing and bedding in her arms.

He thought he saw pain in her eyes when she looked at him, but it was gone a second later, either a figment of his imagination or tucked away behind the cool facade she wore for the world.

She set the clothes on the bed and walked to him without hesitation.

His arms opened of their own volition, his body calling out to her, his soul's yearning finally realized.

"Lyon..." She breathed his name like a prayer, and he wrapped his arms around her, savored her softness. He inhaled her scent and closed his eyes.

When he opened them, she was still there. It was real.

He stroked her hair. “My god, I’ve missed you.”

She pulled away to look up at him, and this time he knew he wasn’t imagining the tears in her eyes. “Not as much as I’ve missed you.”

He tucked a piece of gold hair behind one ear, marveling at the changes in her face, softer than it had been a month earlier.

And harder too.

He pulled back even farther to take in the ripeness of her pregnant body. “Look at you,” he marveled, holding out his hands, resting them carefully on her swollen stomach. “Look at our baby.”

She smiled. “He or she takes after you. Always moving. We’ve been waiting for you to come home.” She inhaled a shuddering breath. “Praying for you to come home.”

He held her face in his hands and lowered his lips to hers, not caring how the crush of the kiss hurt his battered lips. “You brought me home. Rurik told me.”

“The men did the hard part,” she said.

He looked into her eyes, awe overwhelming him. “You’re a leader. A queen.”

She studied him. “Are you okay, my love? Tell me the truth.”

I don’t know. I don’t feel like myself anymore.

He stroked her satiny cheek with his thumb. “I’m fine.”

She reached up, touched his face hesitantly, her fingertips like feathers on his wounds. When she got to his chest, her expression grew cold and sharp. “I’ll kill them myself.”

“There will be no need,” he said. “I’m going to take them apart with my bare hands. And I’m going to do it slowly.”

There was a time when he would have been afraid to speak so openly to his wife. He’d worried she saw him as a thug — and he’d been right. Then, he’d wanted her to know he was

worthy of her. That he wasn't some dumb criminal without any education, without any ambition.

He knew better now. She might look like someone raised in an ivory tower, but his wife had a spine of steel and the heart of a warrior.

She nodded, her eyes lighting with something like anticipation.

She moved to the bed, suddenly all business. "I've sent two of the men to bring you food. Anatoly will see you after you're dressed." She handed him a stack of clothes, and he was relieved to see plush gray sweats and one of his softest T-shirts. She unfurled the sheets to make the bed, met his eyes over the mattress. "Then you're going to sleep, and I won't hear a word of argument, not even from the Lion."

She woke up with a start and felt a moment of panic.

Where was she?

Then she remembered, she was back in the Lake Forest bedroom, this time of her own volition. She must have fallen asleep with Lyon.

She turned her head and found him gone. The morning sun slanted across the bed, a fresh spring breeze blowing through the one window. Lyon must have opened it when he woke up.

She couldn't believe she'd out-slept him after all he'd been through, but a moment later she felt the baby move inside her and remembered her pregnancy.

She was almost always exhausted these days, and while she'd attributed much of it to the stress of Lyon's kidnapping, she had to remind herself that she was in the third trimester of her pregnancy. Her body felt unfamiliar and ungainly, and simple tasks like drying herself off after a shower or tying her shoes now took more energy.

She rubbed her swollen stomach beneath the shift dress she'd worn to the house. "Good morning, little one. Your father is back. Maybe you'll let him feel you kick."

She could hardly think about the wounds on Lyon's face and body without wanting to scream. She wanted to kill the people who had dared lock him up and beat him. It was like seeing a majestic animal in the zoo — the reason she'd never enjoyed going, even as a child.

Wild things weren't meant to be locked up, and there was no man wilder than her Lyon.

I'm going to take them apart with my bare hands. And I'm going to do it slowly.

The words echoed in her mind. She almost wished she could watch. Did that make her an animal too?

She didn't care. She loved Lyon with a depth and strength that stole her breath. She would see anyone who hurt him burn.

She sat up on the bed and listened, catching the murmuring of deep voices from downstairs. The men would be making plans, figuring out what to do about Vadim Ivanov and his move against the Antonov bratva.

She should be there.

She got up with a groan. Her back ached from sleeping on the old mattress, and she made a mental note to start ordering furniture for the new bedroom, then stopped short.

Did they still want to make a home at the Lake Forest house where so much bloodshed had happened? Where sweet-faced Bash had been killed and so many of their men wounded? Where Lyon had been taken?

She didn't know. She would talk to Lyon. If he didn't want to live here, they would find somewhere else to make their home. She didn't care.

Home was with him.

She used the bathroom and rinsed her face with cold water, then stepped out into the hall.

She'd stopped work on the house during Lyon's absence — both because she'd been focused on finding him and because she hadn't been sure they would still move into it —

but the second-floor landing had already been completed, and the vibrant floral wallpaper looked cheerful in the bright morning light.

Her hand glided across the polished mahogany banister as she made her way down the stairs, the murmur of conversation growing louder as she approached the first floor.

She followed the sound down the long hallway that ran the length the house, past the living room and library, the music room with the grand piano that had been a gift from Lyon, the richly paneled room that was meant to be Lyon's office.

They were in the kitchen at the back of the house — Lyon, Alek, Rurik, and Markus — in the middle of what looked like a heated debate about whether they had enough men to go after Vadim's headquarters, assuming they could even locate it.

Lyon's beautiful face was a mess, his ribs taped under the T-shirt she'd brought him from the house. They were just two of an assortment of wounds Anatoly had addressed before Kira got to the house, and she had the sudden urge to spirit Lyon away from this place, this place with bagels and paper coffee cups scattered across the marble island that was meant to be used for baking with their child in the home she'd planned as a peaceful oasis from the violence that was destined to be part of their lives.

She wanted to take him somewhere quiet, make him hot coffee and a warm meal, force him to sleep and sleep, because she already knew her husband had no intention of resting.

Already knew he couldn't.

"The men are tired and beaten," Alek pointed out. "Some of them are still nursing wounds from the invasion. We stretched them thin to get you out, but they're only men. At some point, they're going to need rest."

"Rest means reinforcements," Rurik said.

Lyon scowled, and Kira knew his brilliant mind was at work, moving the pieces on the board around, trying to see

into the future, to get a glimpse of every possibility, every potential outcome.

“I can’t ask Roman to risk more,” he said.

Kira understood his concern. Roman was himself in a precarious position in New York. Igor Kalashnik, Roman’s father and head of the New York bratva, had no idea his son was using a handful of loyalists to help Chicago. Roman had agreed to the arrangement as part of a trade — he would help Lyon secure power in Chicago, and in return, Lyon would help him seize power from his father, a hard man who seemed to have no intention of passing the keys to the New York kingdom, not even to his son.

This, despite the fact that Igor was ninety-years-old and the New York territory was mired in the past, old business practices and a refusal to embrace the future of organized crime keeping the territory from flourishing as it once had.

If Igor found out Roman was helping Lyon without his permission, there would be hell to pay. Kira barely knew Roman, and yet she was afraid for him. She wouldn’t put it past Igor to kill his own son simply to send a message to his men.

“I think you can,” Alek said. “He’s helped you here, but the help you’ll be required to give in return will be far greater than sending a handful of loyalists to help him take New York from Igor.”

Markus tapped his fingers on the marble counter. “Aren’t we getting ahead of ourselves? We don’t even know the location of Vadim’s headquarters. We don’t know how many men he has left, or what an offensive attack would look like, and we also have to stop the bleeding in our territory.”

Kira winced. She’d done her best while Lyon was gone, but they’d been stretched thin. Vadim’s men had been harassing businesses under the protection of the Antonov bratva, stealing trucks commandeered by Lyon’s men, beating the drivers.

They'd obviously wanted information out of Lyon to make their transition to power easier but had been paving the way to take the territory by force if Lyon didn't cooperate.

"None of that matters," Lyon said firmly. He still had dark shadows under his eyes, whether from lack of sleep or trauma or both, Kira didn't know. "We won't let Vadim Ivanov take the Chicago territory, and if we don't stop him, that's what he's going to do. We'll ask Roman for more help, ask the Syndicate if we have to." His expression hardened. "Whatever it takes, we will do. Whatever sacrifice must be made, we will make."

Kira pushed off the wall and entered the kitchen. The men turned their gazes on her, but she saw only Lyon and the way his eyes warmed as she came toward him.

She linked her arm through his. "When do we start?"

Lyon held Kira's hand in the dimly lit doctor's office, waiting while an ultrasound technician named Patty moved the wand over Kira's smooth, swollen stomach. He'd known he was missing part of the pregnancy when he'd been locked up, but it hadn't fully hit him until he'd seen her at the Lake Forest house.

She was still his little falcon, his Kira, his wife. But where before there had only been the suggestion of roundness, her body had grown ripe with promise. Laying on the bed next to her as he'd fallen into sleep, he'd felt their child move inside her and something primal had clicked into place inside him.

A sense of ownership, a determination to protect at any cost.

Now he was going to see their baby for the first time, and he felt a combination of excitement and nerves, as if he might be found wanting by the tiny being coming into focus on the screen.

"Alrighty," Patty said, studying the screen. She was an older woman with red hair and kind blue eyes. There had been no way to explain that he'd found out about Kira's pregnancy late and had then been held prisoner by a fearsome former KGB agent, but Lyon had detected no note of judgement when

he'd told her it was his first sonogram. "There's the head," she said, tracing the round image on the screen, "and you can see the body here."

Kira squeezed his hand and he tore his eyes away from the image on the screen to stare down at her. She looked as beautiful as ever, the pink blouse she wore bringing out the blush in her cheeks, her flaxen hair falling in waves around her shoulders.

"That's our baby," he said.

She gazed up at him. "That's our baby."

He looked at the screen again and was startled by the sense of recognition moving through his body.

There you are...

The words were stuck in his throat, spoken by some other version of himself who had unknowingly been waiting for this moment all his life.

"Active little one," Patty said. "See?" She used the cursor to point to the tiny arms and legs, clearly moving on the screen. "And there's the heartbeat."

She pointed to a flash, then turned a knob on the machine. A moment later, a rhythmic *whoosh* filled the room, like a tiny, faraway train.

"That's a heartbeat?" Lyon said, unable to keep the wonder from his voice.

"That's it," she said. "Nice and strong."

Lyon looked down at Kira. "Like its mother."

She smiled. "And its father."

"Do you want to know the baby's gender?" Patty asked.

Lyon looked at Kira. "Do we want to know?"

He had no idea how any of this was done. He was an only child, a lonely child, without cousins or aunts and uncles. The closest he'd been to pregnancy and childbirth had been when one of the men in the bratva had become a new father, a

position requiring nothing more than congratulations and cigars.

“Do you want to know?” Kira asked.

He thought about it. “I want what you want.”

“I think... I think I want to wait,” she said. “I think we could both use a happy surprise.”

He couldn't disagree.

“We'll wait,” he told Patty.

She smiled. “I'll give you a website with a code. If you change your mind, you can log in — or have someone log in for you — and find out the baby's gender.”

“Thank you,” Lyon said. He hesitated, glancing nervously at Kira, not wanting to upset her after all she'd been through. “Does everything look okay?”

“Everything looks perfect,” Patty said. “The baby is in the 80th percentile for growth and you're right on target for a September 2nd due date.”

“September 2nd,” he murmured.

Vadim hung over the date like a black cloud. Would they be rid of him by then? Would it be business as usual within the *bratva*? Or would something terrible have happened? Something Lyon hadn't anticipated?

No, he wouldn't allow it. Wouldn't allow Vadim to cast a shadow over the most monumental event of his and Kira's lives.

The baby's upcoming due date — just three months away — was more incentive to finish the business that Vadim had started when he'd taken Lyon prisoner.

Patty gave them a few more details, and Lyon stared transfixed at the image on the screen.

That's my child.

He already knew he would burn the world to keep him or her safe.

By the time they stepped out into the sunshine outside the doctor's office, he was eager to get on with the business of finding and eliminating Vadim. He had three months to secure the city for his wife and child, and by god he would do it.

He came to a stop and turned to face Kira, their hands still joined. "It's a miracle. You're a miracle."

She laughed, and he was suddenly shocked he'd been able to live a month without hearing it. "Lots of women have babies."

"Yes, but only one of them is my beautiful wife. Only one of them is our baby," he said.

She smiled, and the sun lit her hair like a halo. "I think the Lion is becoming a romantic," she said teasingly.

"That happened long ago." People milled around them, entering and exiting the doctor's office, walking past on the sidewalk. But all he could see was her. "The day I found you laughing at Dimitri and Odette, I think."

"Was that the day?" she asked. "The day you fell in love with me?"

He could still see her, bent toward the elaborate cage that was home to her beloved birds, cooing softly to them and laughing while they picked apart scraps of paper. It was the first hint of softness he'd ever witnessed in her, and he'd suddenly seen her not as the icy, unattainable princess who had haunted his dreams most of his life, but as a woman.

He stroked her cheek. "I think I've loved you for as long as I can remember. I just didn't know it."

The light of her smile could have powered a small planet. "Do you know what that moment was for me?" she asked. "The moment I started to fall in love with you?"

He shook his head. He wasn't proud of what he remembered from the early days of their marriage. He'd been domineering and unkind, using the obviously powerful physical attraction between them as an armor against the feelings he hadn't wanted to acknowledge.

My god, she had excited him. She still did.

“It was when you gave me the book in Lake George,” she said. “Anna Karenina. Remember?”

He remembered the moment. She’d been wearing the bracelet he’d given her as a late wedding present. Seeing it on her wrist had made him flush with pleasure.

It had been like a brand.

“So not the family heirloom,” he said, making light of the moment. “A book from a second-hand bookstore?”

She smiled and nodded. “I love the bracelet — you know I do — but the book was personal. It was the first gift you gave me that made me feel like you knew me. Or that you wanted to.”

“I did. I do.”

“You don’t think you know me yet, husband?” Her smile was flirtatious, and he was transported back to the early days of their marriage, when she would surprise him with her savage toasts or bawdy sense of humor.

Laughter, strange and unfamiliar after so long without it, erupted from his throat like a runaway train. “I wouldn’t deign such a bold assumption. It will take a lifetime to truly know you, and I look forward to every moment.”

He leaned down to capture her lips. The kiss quickly turned heated, and he marveled that he could still want her with such fervor. He’d been so tired since his rescue, happy to fall asleep with her in his arms. Now, his fatigue all but faded, his desire for her returning like a sudden thunderstorm.

Her mouth was soft and pliant under his, her tongue urgently sweeping his mouth, matching him stroke for stroke. His cock hardened in his trousers, and he was suddenly desperate to be inside her.

He groaned, and she smiled against his mouth. “Shall we hurry home?”

This time his groan was filled not with lust but disappointment. “I’d like nothing more. Unfortunately, I have

a call with Damian Cavallo.”

She looked surprised. “Damian Cavallo?”

“We have to find Vadim if we’re going to eliminate him. And if we’re going to find him, we’re going to need access to a cyberlab.”

“Which means — ”

“Which means,” he said bending to give her a quick kiss, “you need to hurry and pack for New York.”

Kira flipped through the clothes hanging in her walk-in closet, trying to decide what to bring to New York. It would be a short trip, but it would be the first time she and Lyon had been truly alone since he'd come home, and she wanted to make the most of it.

Except she'd only had time to buy a few maternity outfits, and most of the old clothes no longer fit.

"At first," Annie said from Kira's bedroom, "I told him it wouldn't be appropriate. When that didn't work, I told him I just wasn't interested, but he seemed to take that as some kind of challenge."

Annie had been telling her about one of the men on Oleg's crew who'd been a little too friendly.

"Why don't you tell Borya?" Kira asked, returning empty-handed from the closet. She smiled. "Or.. Alek?"

Annie lifted her head, rolled her eyes, and dropped her head back onto the bed. "Stop trying to fix me up with Alek."

"But he's so wonderful," Kira said. "And I see the way you look at each other."

"It's too complicated," Annie said.

“I could tell Lyon,” Kira said, deciding not to push the issue of Alek. “That would put a stop to it.”

“Absolutely not,” Annie said, laying back on Kira’s bed and staring at the ceiling. “I’m not going to validate the stereotype that we all need big, strong men to protect us. Look at you.”

Kira blinked. “What about me?”

“You held that guy off at the wedding all by yourself,” Annie said. “That’s the kind of energy I’m aiming for.”

Kira had a flash of the man in black rounding the corner of the bar where she hid.

His grin as he’d called her a bitch.

С’ка.

The fear that had washed over her like a tidal wave when he’d lifted his gun.

And then, the trigger on the gun in her hand giving way.

The roar of it in her ears.

The man falling to the ground with a look of surprise.

“Oh god,” Annie said, sitting upright on the bed. Her dark eyes were wells of sympathy. “I’m sorry. That was so insensitive of me. You’re probably traumatized.”

“That’s okay,” Kira said. “I haven’t had time to think about it.”

Annie nodded, her black hair tousled from laying on the bed. It wasn’t hard to see why men adored her. “You probably should though. It was an intense experience. It would be good for you to process it properly.”

Annie wasn’t wrong, but there was no time for processing. Besides, Kira was more worried about Lyon. What he’d been through made her experience of the invasion look like a walk in the park, and she already knew he wasn’t even close to processing it.

“I know. I’ll deal with it, I promise,” Kira said.

“Good. And you know I’m always here if you need to talk.” Annie looked down at Kira’s empty hands. “You’re supposed to be packing.”

“I can’t find anything,” Kira said. “Nothing fits. I feel like I’ve exploded while Lyon’s been gone. I’m not sure he’ll even want to...”

Annie lifted her eyebrows. “Fuck you?”

Kira laughed. “Well, yes.”

He’d only been back a week, and it seemed he got home later and later each night. She understood — Vadim’s crew had been eating away at Lyon’s territory while he’d been kept prisoner — but she was hoping the trip to New York would be a chance to reconnect.

“That’s bullshit,” Annie said. “Look at you! Lyon worships you. It’s obvious every time he looks at you. And who wouldn’t? You’re radiant, an absolute madonna of ripe beauty.”

Kira wrinkled her nose. “You make me sound like a piece of fruit.”

“Well, why not? Let’s make sure the Lion wants to take a bite out of you in New York.” Annie jumped up from the bed and grinned. “Or a few licks, at least.”

Kira covered her face and laughed. “You’re mortifying.”

“You love it and you know it,” Annie said, linking her arm through Kira’s and pulling her toward the closet. “Come on. We’re going to make sure Lyon can’t keep his hands off you.”

Lyon closed the door behind the bellhop and headed down the hall of their suite at the Mandarin. He paused at the entrance to the living room and looked at his wife, her back to him as she gazed out over Central Park.

She still took his breath away, but now there was more than the animal lust that had heated his blood in the beginning of their marriage. The hunger he still felt for her body was magnified by a level of need that frightened him.

He didn't know if he could live without her.

She turned, as if she'd felt him watching her, and the sun flared behind her, eclipsing her face. For a moment, it was like she was gone, and dread bloomed in his stomach.

Then, she was back, her face lit gold by the afternoon sun behind her.

She smiled. "How long have you been standing there?"

"Long enough to know I have the most beautiful wife in the world," he said, walking toward her.

She slid her hands up his chest and around his neck. "You've become quite the charmer, Mr. Antonov."

He held her face in his hands. “Only with you, Mrs. Antonov.”

He lowered his mouth to hers, capturing her lips in a kiss that was meant to be gentle but quickly turned bruising. Her tongue met his in a heated sparring match, and his cock was instantly hard, hungry for the sweet heat of her body.

She moaned into his mouth, fanning the flames of his desire, and he pressed into her, regretting the past few nights when he’d chosen not to wake her after coming home late. His intentions had been sound — she needed her rest — but now he feared he wouldn’t be able to restrain his hunger for her when he finally got her naked and in bed.

Which unfortunately, could not be right now.

She was breathless when he pulled away, her eyes glassy, reflecting the same passion he’d felt roaring through his own body.

“You have to go,” she said, her voice thick with regret.

“I have to go,” he repeated, kissing her quickly one last time. “But this will be continued this evening.”

She smiled, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Promise?”

“You can bet on it.” He held her hand as he backed away from her until he had no choice but to drop it. “And Rurik will be right outside the door if you need anything before I get back.”

He’d left Alek in Chicago to lead the men and guard against further encroachment by Vadim. Rurik was the only other man he trusted to protect Kira.

She scowled. “I thought Rurik was going with you.”

“I’m not leaving you alone,” he said.

“But — ”

“I’ll be fine. This is Kalashnik territory. Vadim isn’t ready to take on someone else.”

He turned away before he changed his mind about leaving. He couldn’t afford to lay about with his wife, reacquainting

himself with her body and drinking champagne in bed, however much might want to.

And by god, he did want to.

But he had to protect her, to protect what they were building together.

And that meant he had to grease the wheels of the cavalry he'd been forced to enlist in his cause.



Ellis Island was only accessible by ferry, probably the reason Roman had chosen it as a meeting place. Tailing someone was harder than it looked on TV. It was almost impossible to stay hidden when the mark frequently changed direction and modes of transport, and no mode of transport was harder to tail than a boat.

Lyon watched their approach, the elaborate brick building and patinated copper domes drawing close as they left the Statue of Liberty — the ferry's first stop — behind.

The sky was crystalline overhead, even this close to the city, the water sparkling like it had been cast with nets of white lights. He stood at the bow, breathing in the smell of sea water, the scent of car exhaust and concrete diminishing with the churn of the ferry's motors.

About half of the passengers had disembarked at Lady Liberty. Several of the ones who'd stayed had joined him on the bow, taking pictures of the Island as they approached.

He was always a little surprised to be moved by it. It seemed like such a tourist trap, but it was impossible to watch the compound rise up out of the water and not think about the hundreds of thousands of immigrants who had had the same view under very different circumstances.

The boat slowed down as they approached the landing, and the passengers at the bow moved en masse toward the boat's exit, jostling for position to leave.

Lyon waited until most of them had disembarked, then made his way off the boat and down the ramp. He followed the

crowd inside, passing by a group who had stopped at the tour desk for pre-purchased tours and heading for the main reception area.

He found Roman Kalashnik standing in front of a large display of luggage, much of it left behind by immigrants coming through Ellis or lost by the baggage handlers of the era.

His back was to Lyon, but he would have recognized the other man from any angle. His hair was always a little too long, brushing against the collar of his impeccably tailored shirt.

He had a way of holding himself that suggested royalty, which made sense given his position as Igor Kalashnik's son. Unlike Lyon, who had scraped and schemed his way to leadership in Chicago, Roman was the heir apparent in New York.

And yet, here he was, still one of his father's underlings despite his father's advanced age and obvious lack of interest in innovating for the twenty-first century.

Lyon stepped beside him and studied the luggage, arranged like a haphazard mountain, a sculpture of sorrow.

"I hope I didn't keep you waiting," Lyon said.

"I like to be early," Roman said without looking at him.

Lyon knew this to be true. The first time he'd met with Roman — at Coney Island — Roman had been waiting too.

"Shall we walk?" Lyon asked.

In answer, Roman moved on to the next exhibit. His stride was long and easy, and Lyon was surprised to fall into companionable silence with the other man. They didn't know each other well, and their first meeting had been full of tension.

Then, they'd each had their body men, and neither had known what to expect.

Now, they were united in a common cause, although Lyon's was undoubtedly more urgent.

“You keep trying to kill me,” Roman said, coming to a stop in front of a map showing the countries whose citizens had come to America through the island.

“Hardly,” Lyon said. “I need you too much to want you dead.”

It pained him to admit it, to need anyone, but it was true. If the last year had proven anything, it was that being pakhan wasn't a guarantee of safety. He couldn't keep the role the way he'd captured it — alone.

He needed people he could trust. Allies.

“And yet, here you are,” Roman said.

It was an echo of something Lyon had said to Roman on their first meeting, and Lyon was struck by the circular nature of their association. He hoped one day soon it would come to an end and he would be the one offering aid to Roman.

“I thought an in-person meeting was in order,” Lyon said. “I wanted to say thank you while I'm in New York.”

Lyon preferred to see the people he worked with, to look in their eyes, read their expressions and body language. Too much was lost on the telephone and via text, and he couldn't afford to make a mistake.

“Here to see Cavallo, I take it,” Roman said.

Lyon nodded. “They have a lab.”

“I envy them,” Roman's voice was wistful and Lyon wondered whether he was referring to the Syndicate's cyberlab or the relative peace that had existed in their organization since the fall of Raneiro Donati.

Both, probably.

“They had their demons to slay,” Lyon said.

His unspoken words hung in the air: if they can do it, so can we.

Except Raneiro hadn't been a former KGB operative. He'd been Nico Vitale's mentor, but he hadn't been his father, and Nico had been able to act with a large degree of autonomy, in

the beginning at least, before he threw caution to the wind for the woman who became his wife.

It had grown crowded by the map, and they passed the next exhibit, crowded with school children clearly on a field trip.

“Let’s go up,” Lyon said.

Roman cut him a sharp glance, and Lyon was startled by the vacuum in Roman’s eyes, so dark they were almost black. “You didn’t say you wanted a sightseeing companion.”

Lyon shrugged. “We’re here, and it’s crowded on the first floor.”

They made their way up the stairs in silence, then emerged into the Great Hall on the building’s second floor.

There was more space here, and they continued to an exhibit on immigrants and labor. Old signs hung from the ceiling advertising work for farm hands and miners. They stopped in front of a row of pictures behind glass, all of them depicting people doing the most laborious of work.

“My assistance is not a gift,” Roman said.

“I’m aware.” The men Roman lent Kira to rescue Lyon, the men he would lend Lyon to kill Vadim and his son, were a trade. “How are things here?”

Roman didn’t speak for a long time. When he did, there was something heavy in his voice. “The same.”

Lyon didn’t know a lot about the workings of New York — he’d had his hands full in Chicago — but Igor Kalashnik had a reputation for being ruthless, even with his oldest son.

Especially with his oldest son.

He was a cruel king bent on retaining his crown. Lyon didn’t envy Roman the problem.

“Do you have a timeline?” Lyon asked.

“Soon,” Roman said. “As soon as you have Chicago in hand.”

Lyon nodded. Roman would need all of Lyon's help — and then some — if he was going to forcefully depose his father. "I'm working on it."

"Work fast," Roman said, looking into one of the glass cases where old passports and inspection cards were on display. "My patience is wearing thin."

Lyon bristled against the other man's demand. He was the Lion, used to giving commands, not obeying them.

He forced himself to stuff it down. He needed Roman's help, and Roman was right to be frustrated. Lyon had expected to be firmly in power with his killing of Musa Shapiev. Instead, new enemies had emerged from the shadows, one right after the other.

For all his distance from the fighting, Roman had battle fatigue, was eager to get on with his own fight.

"This will all be over within the next three months," Lyon said. "One way or another."

"What's happening in three months?" Roman asked.

"My wife is having a baby," Lyon said.

Roman looked at him, surprise shading his ebony eyes. "In three months?"

Lyon nodded. He hadn't told Kira yet, but he'd vowed to do whatever was necessary to bring their child into a safe environment, safe being relative to his line of work.

That meant he either had to find and kill Vadim and his son or leave the bratva behind. Kira would object — she was his equal when it came to ambition — but he would leave her no choice.

Bringing up a child in the bratva when he was a pakhan solidly in control and surrounded by loyalists was one thing. Doing it with barbarians at every gate, willing to use Lyon's family as a weapon, was unthinkable.

He wanted all the power leadership of the bratva ensured, but nothing was worth unnecessary risk to Kira and their child.

Lyon was surprised when Roman held out his hand. “Congratulations,” he said. “And god help you.”

Lyon’s laughter was short and hard. “Thank you.”

Roman studied him. “How has it been? Being married to Kira Baranov?” Lyon thought Roman was asking for intimate details and was fully prepared to tell him to go fuck himself, but Roman held up a hand to stop him. “What I meant is... it was arranged, yes?”

Lyon hesitated. “By me, yes. And by her.”

She hadn’t been forced by her father to marry Lyon. Viktor loved his only child too much to do such a thing. Kira had agreed because Lyon had promised she would have a voice in the *bratva*, that the Baranov name would continue to mean something.

“And has it been... agreeable?” Roman asked.

Lyon narrowed his eyes. “What are you getting at?”

Roman turned back to the glass case. “My father wants me to marry Valeriya Orlov. Actually, *wants* is too mild a word. He is coming very close to demanding it.”

“Because she’s Vladimir’s daughter?” Lyon asked. Roman turned to him, surprise again evident on his face, and Lyon laughed. “It’s my job to know these things, the same way it was your job to know I’d married my wife by arrangement.”

“My father thinks having an Orlov in the family will provide us with more capital,” Roman said.

“He’s not wrong,” Lyon said. “The Orlov’s are powerful, wealthy beyond measure. But then, I suspect you know that.”

“And yet, I’m not agreeable to the idea,” Roman said.

“Why?” Lyon asked. As far as he knew, Roman Kalashnik didn’t have a regular woman.

It took so long for Roman to reply that Lyon almost thought the other man hadn’t heard the question.

“I’m not sure,” Roman finally said, his voice puzzled. He turned to look at Lyon. “So? Are you happy with your decision

to marry your wife?”

Kira Baranov is the other half of my soul. The only woman who could ever complete me. The only woman who could ever stand by my side without wavering.

She was made for me.

Such declarations weren't made for an exchange like this one, with a man who was in some ways Lyon's rival.

“I can only speak for myself in saying that the arrangement has worked out in my favor,” Lyon said.

Roman nodded. “Perhaps I will be as fortunate.”

Lyon clapped him on the back as he prepared to leave. “I hope so.”

He was surprised to find he meant it.

Kira took one last look in the mirror and tried to shelve her self-criticism. Annie had done an amazing job helping her find something to wear, but it was hard to see anything but her belly, which seemed to grow more enormous by the day.

The dress was a vision in raspberry, the neckline a deep V, the empire waist tapered just above her bump. The skirt fell in layers of soft tulle over a forgiving lining that flared out from Kira's stomach and hips.

It fell well above her knees, which only highlighted the matching Jimmy Choo sandals she'd chosen for the occasion. The heels were sky-high — Kira had a feeling her sky-high days were numbered so she'd thrown caution to the wind — with a tulle bow across the toes of one shoe and on the heel of the other.

Kira had thought it was too much, but Annie had argued that too much was exactly what Kira and Lyon needed, exactly what they deserved.

Now, Kira thought the advice had been a stroke of genius. She still felt as big as a house, but she had to admit the look worked, especially with the limitations of her pre-pregnancy wardrobe.

Lyon had given up the primary bath so she could get ready in peace, and she'd used it to pile a mass of curls on top of her head. She'd kept her makeup light except for a slash of red lipstick that looked slightly subversive against the sweet pink dress, although not as subversive as the fact that she wasn't wearing a scrap of underclothing.

She was pregnant, not dead, and she didn't want her husband to see her as some kind of untouchable madonna.

No, she definitely didn't want that. What she wanted was for him to fuck her brains out.

She took a deep breath and grabbed her clutch, a gold mesh dazzler reminiscent of the 80s. Then she stepped out of the bedroom and into the dimly lit living room.

Lyon stood at the large picture window overlooking Central Park, the city glittering beyond the darkness of trees.

She stopped in her tracks, taking a minute to appreciate her own view.

He was wearing a navy suit tailored perfectly to his frame, but he'd left off the jacket, giving her a heart-stopping look at his muscled shoulders and broad back, his waist tapering to a muscled ass that looked like it had been poured into his trousers.

The blood quickened in her veins, and she let her gaze travel the length of him, back up to his muscled neck, visible under the hair cut close at the back of his head.

"You look like a magazine spread for the rich and powerful," she said softly.

He turned to look at her, a smile lifting the corners of his mouth. Even with the bruises on his face, fading but not gone, he was beautiful.

"And you look like a magazine spread for perfection," he said.

She walked toward him and placed her clutch against his lapel for balance, careful not to press too hard against his shoulder.

She stood on tiptoe to kiss him. “You should write copy for a jewelry store.”

He laughed uproariously, the first time she’d heard him laugh like that since he’d been back. He reached out to touch her face. “Are you making fun of me?”

“Maybe,” she said. “Probably. I think it must be a perk of the job.”

“You think so?” He leaned in and murmured in her ear. “A perk of my job is giving spankings to naughty girls who use their mouths in ways they shouldn’t.”

He was teasing, but the blood rushed between her legs, moisture slicking her thighs.

She took his hand and guided it up her dress, over her hip and around to her bare ass. “I look forward to it. I’ve even made it easy for you.”

She caught the moment he realized she wasn’t wearing underwear, heard it in the hitch of his breath.

“Sweet Jesus,” he muttered, “maybe we should stay in and order room service.”

“Unhand me, you lout.” She shoved his hand away and started for the door. “You’re taking me to dinner.” She looked over her shoulder and smiled sweetly. “Then you can spank me.”



Gramercy Tavern was packed even for a weeknight, but they were shown immediately to a quiet table at the back. The table consisted of a bench seat on one side and a chair on the other, but instead of pulling the chair out for Kira, Lyon gestured to the booth side and slid in after her with a wicked grin.

After that, she gave herself over to Gramercy Tavern’s famous five-course tasting menu. Lyon’s knee bumped against hers under the table as they sampled moist citrus-cured arctic char and tender gnocchi with mushrooms, roasted duck with bacon and roasted sirloin with eggplant.

Lyon did the work of finishing an exceptional bottle of cabernet, while Kira sipped at her small pour to make it last. They talked about everything and nothing — the city, the best restaurants either of them had ever visited, the places they wanted to travel. They came up with outrageous names for their child — names that would make the poor child the target of every schoolyard bully — and laughed until tears rolled down Kira’s face.

The threats against them were hardly past, but she felt something like relief as she savored the sensation of Lyon’s thigh pressed against hers, the murmur of other diners and the soft clink of silverware, the music playing in the background.

She knew Lyon was still haunted by his time at the hands of Vadim’s men, but so far, he hadn’t opened up when she’d broached the subject. She worried about him — that he would keep it all bottled up, that he wouldn’t want her to know how bad it had been, that he wouldn’t want to share that ugliness with her.

But the dinner felt like a moment of much-needed normalcy, and she didn’t want to ruin it by asking the questions that had been on her mind ever since she’d walked into the bedroom in Lake Forest to find him standing in nothing but a towel, looking shockingly vulnerable, his body battered and beaten.

How are you really, my love?

Now was not the time.

She had just dipped her spoon into a silky chocolate pudding with raspberries and sour cream when she felt the slide of Lyon’s hand on her bare thigh. She forced herself not to pay him any attention, closing her mouth around her spoon instead and moaning with pleasure as his hand crept between her legs.

“Good?” Lyon’s voice was languid, full of sex and cabernet.

She cast him a glance out of the corner of her eyes. “Delicious.”

“Try this,” he said, lifting his dessert fork with his free hand.

He guided it to her mouth, and she looked him in the eye while she took the bite, groaning as the creamy cheesecake laced with fig leaf oil and almonds hit her tongue.

Lyon’s hand slid between her legs, stroking the petals of her sex, his eyes on her face.

“Which do you like best?” he asked, his voice heavy with meaning. He slipped his fingers into her pussy.

“I think I like this one.” Her voice had turned breathy, her mind fogging over with pleasure.

“Hmmm?” he murmured, pressing his thumb against her clit. “This one?”

“Hmm-mmm,” she said. “That one is... very nice.”

The white tablecloth wasn’t very long, not long enough to hide what he was doing if someone really looked. Then again, Lyon had never cared if someone might catch them. She sometimes thought he actually enjoyed the risk, and she had to admit, it was exciting for her too.

She dared a glance around the restaurant as he moved his fingers in and out of her pussy, circling her clit with his thumb the whole time, but everyone was busy with their meals and dinner companions.

It was a good thing, because an orgasm was building at the center of her body, a delicious buzzing taking over her limbs as she climbed toward it.

“Do you want more dessert?” Lyon asked.

“No,” she said, “I want to come.”

Now it was his turn to groan. “The lady knows what she wants.”

He picked up the pace with his fingers and increased the pressure on her clit. She moved her hips in time to his rhythm, trying not to be obvious when she was on the precipice of release.

Lyon leaned in to whisper in her ear. “I want you to come for me,” he said. “Then I’m going to take you home and eat your pussy until you scream.”

An explosion detonated at the center of her body, and she closed her eyes against her will, light bursting behind her eyelids as her channel tightened around his fingers, still stroking, his thumb still working her clit.

When she came back to awareness, she realized she’d dropped her spoon and placed her hands flat on the table. She half expected to see everyone staring at them, but no one was paying them any attention.

Lyon removed his hand, then licked her juices off two of his fingers as the waiter appeared at the edge of their table.

“Can I get you anything else?” the waiter asked.

Lyon looked at her innocently. “What do you think, darling? Would you like something else?”

Kira forced her voice steady. “Just the check please.”

She’d never been so eager to leave an amazing restaurant in her life.

He was humming for her, all the words he hadn't been able to say gathering like a storm inside his body.

They took a cab back to the hotel in silence. He was afraid if he touched her it would all come spilling out, not just the raw physical need for her, but the shadows that now lurked in his bones, that woke him up at night in a cold sweat, biting back a scream.

By the time they got to the elevator, he was half mad with the need to bury himself inside her, to lose himself in her scent and the silk of her skin and the soft moans he knew would come from her mouth when he made her come.

His cock was rigid and painful, and he was glad it was so late. No one else was in the elevator to notice the bulge in his trousers, and he wasn't sure he would have had the presence of mind to try and hide it.

He held her hand as they waited to reach the suite level, sexual tension thick between them. When the elevator door finally dinged their arrival, the doors glided smoothly open and he pulled her from the elevator car and down the hall.

Rurik stood solidly by the door to their suite, but he moved quickly aside when he saw them coming.

“Rurik,” Lyon said with a nod.

Rurik nodded, but his bland expression didn't change. Maybe he knew Lyon was dying to fuck his wife senseless, maybe not.

Lyon didn't care.

He had the door open in less than five seconds and closed even faster. Then he was pulling Kira into the darkened suite.

He threw the keycard on the console table in the suite's foyer and swept her into his arms. Even with the baby — their baby — growing inside her, she felt light as a feather, and still, the most treasured thing that had ever been his.

She didn't protest, just looked into his eyes as he carried her through the darkened living room, New York City shining like a jewel beyond the park.

He set her gently on her feet next to the bed, then took the gold clutch from her hand to place it on the end table.

He looked at the dress that flowed over her swollen stomach, looking for the fastest way to remove the garment. He prided himself on acting smoothly at times like this, but he'd never seen the dress, didn't have the patience to hunt for a way to eliminate it as a barrier between them.

He chuckled softly. “How do I get this thing off?”

“Zipper,” she said, her eyes shining as she looked up at him. “In the back. It's the only thing that fit.”

He bent to kiss her forehead. He wasn't the only one who had suffered during his captivity. Kira hadn't been able to enjoy her pregnancy, hadn't been able to shop for new clothes or finish the nursery or do any of the millions of things they would have done together if Vadim hadn't stolen a precious month of their lives.

“Turn around, my love.” Emotion — anger — had thickened his voice.

She did, facing the bed so that her back was to him, and he felt for the zipper in the dark of the room. He pulled the metal tab slowly, revealing her smooth back an inch at a time, afraid

to speak, almost afraid to breathe in case he might wake himself from a dream he never wanted to end.

She was here. Right in front of him. He hadn't dared to believe it might actually happen. Hadn't dared to believe it might not.

He slid the dress from her shoulders, heard it drop in a soft rush of fabric, felt it pool at their feet.

Then the heat of her body was against him, her back molded to his chest as he reached around to touch her breasts, plush and heavy. He stroked her nipples and she lay her head back against his shoulder with a sigh.

He moved his hands to her stomach, marveling at the smooth swell of it in his hands, then laughed in surprise when he felt the baby nudge softly from inside.

He felt as if someone had placed an overfilled balloon in his chest, so happy he might float away.

"You've never been more beautiful," he said.

She turned in his arms. "I thought maybe you didn't still want me."

He flinched. "How could you...?"

She sighed. "I'm... not how I used to be. We haven't —"

He smoothed her hair back from her forehead and looked into her eyes in the dark. "Nothing could make you more desirable to me than the fact that our child is growing inside you. Nothing could make me want you more. The last week has been so busy. I'm sorry you felt neglected."

He didn't know how to tell her the truth.

I'm not how I used to be either.

He wanted to pretend the imprisonment and torture he'd endured at Vadim's hands hadn't affected him.

He was the Lion.

He was supposed to be immovable.

Fearless.

Unbeatable.

But his weeks locked in the tunnels, being subject to the whims of his captors, had shaken him. It had proven he wasn't a god. He wasn't invincible. He hadn't even been able to protect his wife and unborn child when Vadim's men invaded their wedding.

His body was no longer a pillar of strength and perfection.

He was bloody. Bruised. Scarred.

All of it evidence that Vadim had broken him.

It felt like a dirty secret, one he was desperate to hide, from Kira most of all.

"So you don't find me... unappealing like this?" she asked.

He wanted to weep for the insecurity in her voice. Kira Baranov had been an untouchable ice queen for as long as he could remember. A woman who could have any man she desired.

Now she felt unattractive because of his own baggage. She didn't deserve that.

"I've never wanted you more." He meant every word. "Let me show you."

He reached into the mass of curls at the top of her head and removed the pins holding it in place. It fell in silken strands a little at a time, brushing against his hands before spilling onto her shoulders.

When he was sure he had gotten all the pins, he slid his hands into her hair and cradled her head, looking down at her with adoration. She'd always been beautiful, but he wasn't exaggerating in saying that she was more beautiful now than ever.

He lowered his mouth to hers and captured her lips in a searing kiss.

She opened to him with a soft moan, meeting his tongue as he swept her mouth, her hands working the buttons on his

shirt.

She pushed it off his shoulders and ran her fingers gently over the cuts Sergei had made across his chest. Her fingertips were light as a whisper against his broken skin.

It was his imperfection that hurt.

He angled his head to take the kiss deeper, the swell of her stomach erotic against his engorged cock. Her mouth was a refuge from the memory of everything that had happened to him, and he pressed her more tightly against him, eager to leave it all behind in the glory of her body.

She broke their kiss and touched her lips to his neck, then continued to his chest where she left soft kisses on his wounds.

“I will kill them,” she said with each kiss. “I will kill them all.”

Her words stoked the fire already burning at his center. Here was a woman who didn't apologize for his pain, but one who, if given the chance, would avenge it.

She reached for the button on his trousers and worked the zipper, then slid her hand inside.

He groaned as her warm palm closed around his shaft. He fisted his hand in her hair, then remembered the baby and loosened his grip.

Her head snapped up, her eyes like emerald fire. “Don't you dare, Lyonya Antonov.” He must have looked as shocked as he felt, because she continued. “Don't you dare treat me like a piece of glass just because I'm pregnant. I've been waiting for you to come home for all kinds of reasons, but one of them is because I'm dying for you to fuck me.”

He tightened his hand in her hair again, forcing her head back. Her bare throat was exposed, pale and creamy in the dark room, her chest rising and falling.

For a long moment, there was no sound in the room except for her rapid breathing.

He released his hold on her hair. When he spoke, his voice sounded guttural to his own ears. “Then turn around, wife.”

She obeyed, turning to face the bed.

“Hands on the mattress, *malen'kiy sokol*.”

He'd meant the name to be flattering when he'd given it to her — falcons observed their prey from the sky before going in for the kill — but he was beginning to think she deserved an even more powerful nickname.

She'd become a lion in her own right.

A queen.

He let his gaze travel the length of her elegant spine, over the swell of her hips, now fuller and rounder. He ran a hand down her back, his cock throbbing with desire when it bumped up against her velvety skin.

He was eager to explore the new curves of her body, the heaviness in her breasts, the soft roundness where once there had been smooth planes.

Eager to deliver on his promise to make her come with his mouth.

But that would have to wait. He needed to be inside her.

He dropped his pants the rest of the way and kicked them aside, then positioned himself snugly behind her ass, sliding his cock between her thighs.

She moaned as he slid through her folds, close to her channel but not yet inside it. Her juices slicked the head of his cock, and he closed his eyes, forced himself not to drive into her fast and hard, not to thrust mindlessly until he came.

“You're so wet,” he murmured, sliding his shaft back and forth. “So ready.”

“Please,” she gasped.

He positioned himself at her entrance, prepared to guide himself in slowly, not wanting to hurt her, then heard her voice in his head.

Don't you dare treat me like a piece of glass...

He held on to her hips and drove into her with a savage thrust.

She cried out, and he leaned over her body and reached around to take her breasts in his hand, marveling at their new weight and fullness. He pinched her nipples gently between his fingers, happy just to be buried in her heat.

To be home again.

“My god, you feel good,” he said in her ear. “I’ve dreamed about this — dreamed about you — a million times.”

“Please, Lyon.” She pushed back against him, driving his cock even deeper inside her. “Fuck me.”

He withdrew his hands from her breasts and grabbed on to her hips, then withdrew his cock a little at a time. It was sweet torture leaving her body, and he hesitated only a second before driving into her again.

She fisted the comforter in her hands and cried out into the room.

He palmed the smooth skin of her ass and held on to her hips to push into her again. Reason receded as he was enveloped in her tight channel, surrounded by her slippery warmth, and he moved faster, his body working on pure instinct, seeking the release that was already lurking at the center of his being.

She was ready too. He heard it in the way her breath sped up, then hitched as she came closer to the peak, felt it in the way she pushed back against him as he stroked into her, pulled away when he withdrew, contributing to the push and pull of his thrusts.

He cleared his head enough to reach around, over their child inside her stomach, down to her pussy. He slipped his hand between her legs and found her clit, then circled it with two fingers while he thrust faster and deeper inside her.

She moaned. “Oh my god... Don’t stop.”

“I’m not going to stop. Not until you come for me.”

A buzzing sounded in his ears, the room receding around him, everything else dropping away as he pushed through her engorged channel again and again, slamming into her, the pregnancy forgotten in the raw hunger pulsing through his body.

“Oh god... oh god... Lyon..”

She shuddered under him, tipping into her orgasm, her tunnel clamping down on his shaft. It made pushing into her even more erotic and his own orgasm gathered, then spilled over all at once.

He growled into the room, the sound primal and animalistic as he drove into her again and again, the world disappearing in the pure ecstasy flooding his body like water behind a broken dam.

In the haven of her body, there was no Vadim, no bratva. Even his ambition fell away.

Right now, all he wanted was more of this: Kira under him panting and trembling, welcoming him into her warmth again and again.

He didn't stop thrusting until she stopped shuddering, his own orgasm fully depleted. Then he traced a line down her spine with his hand.

“Do you believe I want you now?” he asked.

She pulled away from him and he slid out of her pussy.

Then she rolled over to look up at him. She took his hand and scooted back on the bed, bringing him with her. “I'm not sure,” she said coyly. “Let's try it again.”

He laughed and moved between her thighs.

Sunlight leaked in through cracks in the curtains when Kira woke the next morning. She turned reflexively to the pillow next to her and saw that Lyon was already gone.

She wasn't entirely surprised. He had a meeting with Damian Cavallo today, the main reason for their trip to New York. She would have loved a lazy morning together, but this wasn't a vacation.

Besides, Lyon had more than made up for the rushed trip last night, and she had the soreness to prove it. She stretched and smiled as she remembered the way he'd taken possession of her body again and again, exploring every inch of her with his hands and mouth as if she were uncharted territory, marveling at her larger breasts and the smooth orb of her stomach, pausing to feel their baby move inside her.

He'd made her come with his mouth, had fucked her until she was sure she couldn't come again, then proved her wrong by stroking her clit while he pushed carefully inside her ass.

Her cheeks flamed at the memory, but her body burned for more.

She sighed and sat up, then opened the curtains and used the bathroom.

She wrapped herself in one of the thick hotel robes and padded barefoot into the living room. She was planning to order coffee when a knock sounded at the door.

She looked through the peephole and found Rurik standing on the other side of the door.

She opened the door and he moved aside to make space for a room service waiter, standing by with a large wheeled table.

“Lyon wanted you to have breakfast,” Rurik said. He handed her an envelope. “And he wanted me to give you this.”

“Thank you.” She moved aside to make room for the waiter to bring in the table. “Have you eaten?” she asked Rurik. You’re welcome to join me. If I know Lyon, there’s enough food here for six men.”

This wasn’t the first time he’d treated her to a room service breakfast, and while she’d worked up quite an appetite the night before, she was still only one woman, albeit a very pregnant one.

“I’m fine,” Rurik said.

She should have known. Rurik would never leave his post to indulge in a meal, even if that meal was taken with her.

“Let me know if you change your mind,” she said.

She signed the room service slip, added a hefty tip, then lifted silver domes on strawberries and whipped cream, golden French toast, a bowl of fruit, and a basket of pastries. There was even an omelette, and she heard Lyon’s voice in her ear saying she and the baby needed protein.

She poured herself a cup of coffee — decaf, she noted, marveling at her husband’s attention to her needs even in the face of the threats against him and all he’d been through — then opened the envelope Rurik had handed her.

She smiled at the sight of her husband’s handwriting.

My darling,

Enjoy your breakfast and get ready for company.

I can't wait to see your face again. I can't wait to be inside you again.

L

Her cheeks heated again, desire flooding her body. The exquisite soreness between her legs didn't keep her from wanting him over and over.

Company? What kind of company could possibly join her in New York?

She sighed, wondering what he had up his sleeve, then dug into the food. She spent the next hour feasting on a little bit of everything, reading the New York Times book review and fashion sections, feeling like a hedonist after more than a month of meetings and strategy sessions trying to arrange for Lyon's rescue.

By eleven a.m., she was dressed in a velour track suit, hoping her company didn't expect something fancier from her. All of her trousers were too tight, and her skirts felt too fancy for staying in the hotel, although before her pregnancy she wouldn't have thought so.

A knock sounded from the door at precisely eleven, and she looked through the peephole to find Rurik staring back at her once again.

She opened the door and he stepped aside.

A young woman with long brown hair stood next to a gray-haired gentleman. Behind them, two covered racks of clothes stood next to several suitcases.

"Hello," Kira said. What was this? "I'm Kira Antonov. I'm sorry. I... I don't know who you are."

The older man was trim and chic in a purple suit, his blue eyes peering at her from behind fashionable glasses. "My dear, we're the answer to your prayers." He scanned her body, his gaze analytical as he took in the track suit. "And I do hope you have been saying them."

The criticism wasn't unkind, and she suddenly understood.

They were stylists. Lyon had sent them to help her find clothes.

She laughed. "You have no idea." She stood back to open the door wider. "Please come in."

Lyon navigated the rented Lexus slowly down the private road, eyeing the security cameras mounted on the old growth trees that rose on either side. They weren't yet in full bloom, but many of them had sprouted fresh chartreuse leaves, and buds had formed on the others.

It felt like a promise, spring in bloom everywhere he looked, and he couldn't help but feel a glimmer of hope that this was a new beginning for him and Kira too. That they would eliminate Vadim Ivanov before the birth of their baby and continue to live — and reign over the bratva — in Chicago.

He wanted it to be true, but he'd meant what he said to Roman: he wouldn't risk their safety. And if protecting them meant walking away from the empire he'd fought for, the empire he'd bled for, so be it.

He emerged from the winding road into a circular drive laid around an old stone fountain burbling softly at its center. Beyond the drive, a stately house — more of a mansion really — loomed like something out of an old Gothic movie.

He should have expected it. Damian Cavallo was from old money, had inherited all of his parents' wealth, then built on it, first through his opportunistic — and highly illegal — work

while the Syndicate had been in turmoil, and later by leading their New York territory.

Still, it was impressive, the stately manor house making it clear that Cavallo and his family had been here for a long time and were here to stay.

He parked next to a beat-up green Volvo — interesting — and got out of the car. Beyond the house, verdant lawns stretched toward a line of towering trees that rimmed the property on all sides. It was hard to believe the countryside through which he'd driven was less than an hour outside of New York City.

He wondered how deep the forest went, wondered if Cavallo had security in the woods to keep his enemies from approaching the house from that direction.

He would have to ask. He had no intention of abandoning the home in Lake Forest he'd bought for Kira. They'd agreed they wouldn't let Vadim's assault sully their plans for the future.

Lyon had already made arrangements to provide for Bash's mother. He and Kira would plant a tree on the grounds in the young man's honor. Then they would get on with the business of living and making happier memories there.

Still, he wanted his wife and child — children, he hoped — to be safe, and he would go to any lengths to see it done, even if it meant stationing an army in the trees beyond the lawn of the house.

He headed for the front door (more security cameras mounted in the eaves), gravel crunching under his shoes as he walked past a picturesque fountain. The house in Lake Forest had a fountain too, but it was sadly defunct. Lyon was suddenly eager to get it running again. The sound of running water was soothing, and he imagined walking in the courtyard with Kira and the baby, letting the child splash his or her hands in the water.

He climbed the steps of a wide stone porch and used the heavy bronze door knocker — some kind of gargoyle,

probably original to the house — to knock on the carved wood door.

He was getting ready to knock again when a woman with shoulder-length, dark hair opened the door. She was half-turned away, saying something to someone behind her, and when she turned to face him he was immediately struck by her wide brown eyes.

“You must be Lyon,” she said, a little out of breath.

He nodded.

She held out her hand. “Aria, Damian’s wife. I’m sorry to be so harried. No school for the twins today.” She laughed and held open the door. “They have us running.”

He shook her hand and stepped inside, his gaze traveling up the triple-height foyer and winding staircase to the second floor. The walls were covered with a beautifully vibrant wallpaper that looked like it had been there for a hundred years, although he knew that couldn’t be right because he’d heard the house had been badly damaged in a fire a few years earlier.

“I’ll take you to Damian,” Aria said.

He followed her down a long, wide hall, open doors revealing glimpses of various rooms, all of them richly but comfortably furnished. “You have a beautiful home,” he said, taking in the old art on the walls, the wide moldings and old furniture that spoke of history, of permanence.

Of family.

“Thank you,” she said, turning around to smile at him. “We’ve been renovating forever.” She laughed. “By the time we’re done, we’ll probably have to start all over.”

“Looks like it’s been worth it.”

It was exactly the kind of place he wanted for Kira, the reason he’d purchased the Lake Forest house for her. He wanted her to have a house filled with books and music, a house where she could play her piano by the window, where

their children could run up and down the stairs, their laughter echoing through the rooms.

“I think so,” she said, leading him through a gourmet kitchen and stopping at a set of glass double doors. “And the work is part of the fun.”

He smiled. “I’ll take your word on that part.”

She opened the doors and led him outside to a multi-level terrace overlooking the back lawn.

“Dad! Dad! Look!”

Lyon followed the sound to a pool down the stairs and near the lawn where two boys splashed. Damian Cavallo crouched near the edge, his shirt sleeves rolled up as he put his hand in the water and said something to the boys.

He straightened all at once, as if he’d sensed Lyon — or more likely Aria — looking at him.

He lifted a hand, but Lyon had the sense it wasn’t meant for him. A second later, Aria lifted her hand, her smile almost wistful, as if they hadn’t seen each other in a long time even though they were married and probably saw each other every day.

Cavallo said something else to the boys, their dark hair slicked back like seals, and started toward Lyon and Aria.

“You found us,” Damian said, hurrying lightly up the terrace stairs and kissing Aria on the lips.

“I did.” Lyon looked around. “It’s quite a place.”

“I’m sorry you had to come all the way out here. We’re taking delivery on some furniture for the third floor today,” Damian said.

Lyon almost felt honored. He had the feeling Damian wasn’t a man who apologized often. “It’s no problem. I appreciate your help.”

“Can I get you anything? Iced tea? A beer? Coffee?” Aria asked.

“You don’t have to wait on us,” Damian said, “The boys want to show you their backflips.”

Aria groaned. “Another thing to keep me up at night.”

Damian turned to Lyon. “They’re a handful.”

Lyon found himself smiling. “Good for them.”

Damian laughed. “Easy for you to say.”

“Delivery should be in the next couple of hours,” Aria said, heading down the terrace steps toward the pool.

“I got it,” Damian said, his eyes lingering on her retreating figure. Damian turned his eyes on Lyon. “Ever feel like the luckiest guy in the world?”

“Every day,” Lyon said. “Except for the part where Vadim Ivanov wants to kill me.”

Damian nodded. “About that.” He gestured to the patio furniture that dotted the terrace near the kitchen. “Have a seat. I’ll be right back.”

He hurried in through the kitchen and returned a few minutes later holding a manila envelope.

He handed it to Lyon. “Take a look.”

Lyon withdrew a stack of photographs, all stills from security cameras with varying degrees of detail. They were pictures of various men, some in suits, some in jeans and leather jackets. In some of the pictures the men stood against a brick building. In others, they congregated outside what looked to be a neighborhood deli or mini-market.

“These the guys you’re looking for?” Damian asked.

Lyon looked closer, holding the photos up to the sun, honing in on individuals in the photos. Finally, on the fourth photo, he found what he was looking for.

“This one,” he said. “Guy in the shirt, with the watch.”

He had a flash of rose gold, the glint of a knife.

Felt the blade bite into his skin.

“You good?” Damian asked.

Lyon realized he was sweating and was surprised by the note of concern in the other man's voice. Like Roman, Damian Cavallo was an uneasy ally, but even more so because he was one of the Syndicate's bosses.

Lyon took a deep breath. "Fine."

"Heard you had a rough go of it." Damian's eyes were kind. "You have a lot on your plate, but when things settle down, well... no shame in needing a little help processing it all." He hesitated. "My wife was taken prisoner once. By the Greeks. She still wakes up shaking and sweating in the middle of the night. That was almost ten years ago."

Lyon nodded slowly. "Thank you." He handed Damian the picture. "This one. The guy in the white shirt, Piaget watch. That's Vadim's son, Sergei."

"I know," Damian said. "I just wanted you to confirm it. Keep flipping."

Sergei was depicted in several of the photos, always surrounded by other men.

Security, Lyon assumed.

"He's been wounded," Lyon said, studying one of the photos. Sergei's sleeve was rolled up, a bandage around his forearm.

"Shot," Damian said. "Word is it happened when your guys came in to get you. Ballsy move on your wife's part, by the way."

Lyon felt a rush of pride. "My wife is a strong woman."

"Heard Sergei took one to the shoulder too," Damian said.

"And Vadim?" Lyon asked.

"Last picture," Damian said.

Lyon skipped to the end, his eyes glued to the image in front of him: an older man, still trim but with a slight paunch, graying hair long around his ears.

"Vadim." Lyon studied the picture, focusing on the details, feeling the pieces of the puzzle trying to click into place. It

didn't come in a flash of discovery, but in the memory of scent: fresh water and peat, cold air and wind. "He's staging from one of the water cribs."

"Based on the triangulation from all these cameras, my techs agree," Damian said.

Lyon couldn't believe it. He'd forwarded Damian names and photos of Vadim and his son — Sergei was easy, he was always out on the town drinking and drugging, but Vadim had been harder — but he hadn't expected an exact hit from the Syndicate's cyberlab so soon. It only validated his plans to set one up for the bratva sooner rather than later.

There was no way to do business without it in this era of organized crime. Men like Igor Kalashnik, Roman's father, were hurting their organizations by keeping them in the past.

"Motherfucker," Lyon said.

It was brilliant. Most of the water cribs had been built in the 1800s as a way to funnel fresh water from the lake to the city for drinking water. Most of them were defunct, but they still sat out on the lake, circular structures built out of concrete, a strange circus tent in the middle of the water.

No one paid any attention to them anymore except as a source of historical fascination. Lyon had read that once upon a time, the cribs had been manned by workers stationed on the water. They'd slept and eaten there to keep an eye on the structure, working in shifts.

Now, the cribs were monitored by the city from afar.

And probably not very closely.

"I assume you know they're connected to the mainland by tunnel," Damian said.

Lyon nodded, his mind already at work. He focused on the area surrounding Sergei and the other men in the pictures. "That's Lawrence Street, by the park."

For years, Lyon had run miles through the city on his early morning jogs, plotting his takeover of the bratva. It was the one time of day he didn't have to pretend to be a lowly cog in

the wheel, the one time of day he could indulge his fantasies of being pakhan.

He knew that street. Knew all of them.

“That’s what our guys said,” Damian said.

Lyon shoved the papers back into the manila envelope and stood. “Thank you. Truly.”

Damian nodded. “You’ll need help, additional men.”

“I’ve already contacted Murphy,” Lyon said. He exhaled. “I owe you.”

What he really meant was that he owed the Syndicate. It didn’t hurt as much as he’d expected.

Damian grinned. “Don’t think we won’t collect.”

Lyon laughed. “Not for a second.”

He waved to Aria, still out with the twins by the pool, and Damian walked him to the door.

Lyon pulled down the long driveway with his mind spinning. Vadim had kept him in the freight tunnels, but that’s not where he was staging.

He was staging from the water, from the cribs.

That meant he either wanted to make it difficult for someone to get to him, or he had a lot more men than they’d bargained for.

Or both.

Lyon used voice command to call Alek.

“What’s up, boss?”

“Gather the men together tomorrow morning,” Lyon said. “Just the ones who were part of the invasion in the tunnels and the hospital.”

There had been no leaks among the men involved in his rescue. If there had been, Lyon wouldn’t be free.

“You found them?” Alek asked.

“I found them. And Alek?”

“Yeah?

“We’re going to need some boats.”

Lyon waited in the wood paneled room, remembering the last time he'd been here. Kira had fled to Orcas Island, although Lyon hadn't known then that Alek had found her and was on his way back.

Lyon had been nervous, wondering if his handling of the feud with Musa would prevent him from being named pakhan by the Spies, but in the end, he'd been the lesser of two evils.

Now Musa was dead, and instead of building an empire as Lyon had planned, instead of bringing the bratva into the twenty-first century, he was beating off yet another rival, approaching the Spies from a position of weakness, to ask permission no less.

It was enough to make him crazy, and he forced himself to breathe, to stay focused on the long game. It was understandable that more than one man would be in the race for control of the bratva. It was a lucrative territory, one that could be made even more lucrative if led by the right person.

His mistake had been in believing Viktor Baranov was his key to the kingdom. He should have expected there would be others vying for the crown.

A door opened in the wood-paneled wall and a broad-shouldered man in a suit entered the room, a weapon visible under his jacket. “They’ll see you now.”

Alek straightened as if to follow him, and Lyon held up a hand. “I’m good.”

Alek reluctantly stepped back against the wall, and Lyon followed the suited man through the door.

The room had been a ballroom in the mansion’s heyday. Now it was cavernous and nearly empty of furnishings, only a carpeted runner leading to a curved wooden table at the other end of the room.

The room was dimly lit by the chandeliers overhead, the atmosphere hushed as Lyon approached the nine men seated behind the table.

“Good evening,” Lyon said to the members of the Two Spies. “Thank you for seeing me.”

The gratitude was a courtesy of sorts. The Spies were technically under his authority, but there were certain instances where their permission might be required.

Or their forgiveness.

In this case, he’d opted for the former. His reputation as a violent and reckless hothead was well documented. As pakhan, he had to prove those days were behind him, that he could be counted on to act wisely, to seek counsel before taking risks that affected the organization.

Looking at the nine solemn-faced men behind the table, he suddenly hoped he hadn’t been misguided.

“Of course,” Ivan said smoothly. Lyon was almost glad they’d confiscated his weapon at the door. It was hard to look at Ivan — mentor, friend, traitor — and not want to kill him. “We are at your service.”

“It has come to my attention that we are under attack by Vadim Ivanov,” Lyon said. “He was the one who held me prisoner, who has been interrupting our business dealings in the city.”

“Vadim has no authority here,” Nikolai Ilyan said, his Russian accent still thick.

“It seems he wishes to change that,” Lyon said.

“And that is why you’re here?” Dema Latvian asked, his aging voice cracking.

“The only way to eliminate the threat to the organization is to eliminate Vadim and his son Sergei,” Lyon said.

“And you come seeking permission?” Borya asked.

As Annie’s brother and a member of Lyon’s inner circle, Borya was lending Lyon a hand, giving him an opening. He said a silent prayer of gratitude for the man, and for Kira’s foresight in promising him a spot on the council in exchange for his early loyalty.

“I do.” Lyon forced the words from his mouth.

Permission, not forgiveness.

“Might it not be wise to engage in dialogue before bloodshed?” the simpering Pavel Yeltchin asked.

“For god’s sake, the man was tortured and nearly killed by Vadim Ivanov,” Silas Gorky said, his frustration obvious. “What do you suggest he do? Invite Ivanov for tea?”

“Well, no...” Yeltsin said.

“I think we have enough of the details to discuss this matter,” Ivan said. Lyon tried to hide his surprise. “You may wait in the antechamber.”

“Thank you for your time.” Lyon bowed his head and headed toward the door, already thinking about his next move should the Spies deny him permission to eliminate Vadim and Sergei Ivanov.

He stepped through the door to find Alek pacing the room.

“So?” Alek asked.

“They’re discussing it,” Lyon said, straightening his jacket.

“Fuck,” Alek muttered. “What’s to discuss?”

Lyon shrugged. “They’ll be sanctioning the assassination of a former KGB officer, one who still has friends in very high places. It could be a very bad boomerang.”

Alek ran his hands through his hair. “Not as bad as letting Vadim Ivanov take another crack at us.”

Lyon studied him. “How are you?”

Alek looked surprised by the question. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, how *are* you, Alek?” The last few weeks had surely taken a toll on his friend. He’d dealt with the aftermath of the invasion — including Bash’s death — and had then seen to Kira’s needs, all while helping to mobilize the men for Lyon’s rescue.

Guilt shamed him. He should have asked the question sooner.

“I’m fine,” Alek said.

“I think you could use a break,” Lyon said.

Alek’s laugh was short and bitter. “That’s not going to happen anytime soon.”

“Let’s see what the Spies say,” Lyon said. “As soon as this is over, I want you to take some time.” Alek opened his mouth to protest and Lyon leveled his gaze at the other man. “It’s not a suggestion.”

Alek sighed, then nodded.

The door to the ballroom opened, and they both turned to see the suited guard standing in the doorway. “Your presence is requested.”

Lyon glanced at Alek, then headed for the door.

The ballroom was a time warp. Here, nothing ever changed, and Lyon had the sense that he could return in fifty years and find the same men sitting, stone-faced, behind the curved table.

He stood before them and said nothing. There was nothing left to say.

Ivan spoke first, as Lyon had known he would. The old bastard was enjoying this, enjoying the power he held over Lyon in spite of his betrayal.

“We have decided to sanction your assassination of Vadim Ivanov and his son.”

Lyon forced himself not to show relief. “I’ll see it done.”

“You will let us know when you learn of their location, keep us apprised of the situation,” Ivan said.

Lyon favored him with a small nod. He hadn’t told the Spies about the water cribs, about the fact that he’d asked the Syndicate for help locating Vadim.

Some things were better held close to the vest.

He’d turned to go when Ivan’s voice sounded again at his back. “Lyonya.”

Lyon turned, hating the sound of his full name in Ivan’s mouth. It was the name Lyon’s father had used, and it seemed like a sacrilege that it would be used by the man who had been like a father to him before his betrayal.

“Let this be the last disruption to our organization,” Ivan said. “Otherwise, we might begin to think it would be better placed in another’s hands.”

A storm of fury spun in Lyon’s chest. How dare Ivan speak to him this way? How dare Ivan sit there, placid and superior, accusing Lyon of poor leadership when it was Ivan who had let loose Lyon’s first challengers?

If not for Ivan, Lyon would have had the organization firmly in hand when Vadim appeared. He would have had more men, might have had their own cyberlab up and running. His war with Musa — a war orchestrated by Ivan — had cost him time and resources.

He simply nodded. He didn’t have the proof that would be required to level a credible accusation against a respected member of the Spies.

Ivan had made sure of that.

He walked swiftly to the door, eager to get as far away from Ivan as possible. The man was poison. Lyon would work to eliminate him from the Spies as soon as the organization was stabilized.

Alek pushed off the wall as Lyon came through the door, the only question that mattered in his eyes.

Lyon brushed past him on the way out of the room. "Let's do this."

Kira opened the box and parted the old tissue paper, then withdrew a delicate lace baby gown.

“Is this... is this my christening gown?” she asked.

“That it is,” Lina said, leaning over to get a better look. “Your mother had it made from Russian lace, shipped here especially for the occasion.”

“You have to take that for the baby!” Annie exclaimed, rubbing the lace gently between her fingers. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“There is nothing finer than Russian lace,” Zoya sniffed imperiously.

They were at the Baranov estate, going through some baby things Lina had found in the attic. She’d had Peter, the ground’s manager, bring them down for the occasion, and they’d spent the afternoon going through the boxes, drinking tea — or vodka in Lina and Zoya’s case — and dining on Lina’s tea sandwiches.

“I think there’s a picture of me in this,” Kira said.

She got to her feet and left the parlor for the old sitting room. Sure enough, there it was, on the mantle: a photograph

of Kira's parents, Kira bundled in her mother's arms as her father beamed proudly, the lace christening gown trailing like a fine banner from Kira's small form.

She smiled at the photograph even as a wave of pain clenched her heart. How she missed them! They'd been such fine parents, gentle but strong, and she wanted nothing more than to feel their guiding hand as she embraced on her own parenting journey with Lyon.

Losing her mother at the age of twelve had been painful, but it had brought Kira and her father even closer. For the fourteen years after her mother's death, it had been just the two of them with Lina and Zoya in the house, Peter coming and going as he maintained the grounds. They'd made for an unconventional family, but it had been her family, and she'd loved every one of them.

Then she'd married Lyon and her father had been murdered by Musa Shapiev. Nothing had been the same since, though the house stood like a time capsule, unchanged since his death.

"Did you find it?" Annie called from the other room.

"Yes, coming," Kira called heading back to the parlor.

She would have to do something about the house soon. Although the money from her father's considerable estate was more than enough to pay the bills and continue Lina and Peter's generous salaries, it wasn't fair to leave them here, rattling around in the great old place alone.

It wasn't fair to the house either. It was a beautiful home that had given her decades of love and shelter. It deserved another loving family.

She sighed, tabling her sorrow at the thought of another child running through its halls. Change was the only constant. This, she knew. But she had had quite a lot of it in the past year, and she was ready for stability.

For peace.

"Here it is," she said, handing Annie the photo.

“I’d forgotten how beautiful your mother was,” Annie said, staring at the picture. “I was young when she passed away.” She looked at Kira, lowering herself back to the floor and the unopened boxes that awaited. “You look so much like her. I never realized.”

“Do I?” Kira asked, flushing with pleasure.

Annie nodded. “Although you have your father’s eyes.”

“And his death wish,” Zoya muttered.

Kira rolled her eyes. She was used to Zoya’s doom and gloom. “And yet, here I am.”

“You’ve been lucky,” Zoya said.

“We’re not doing this again,” Kira said, opening the next box.

Zoya had made it clear she thought Kira foolish for staying in Chicago while Vadim was still trying to overthrow Lyon in the bratva. Kira had heard her out — Zoya had been like a mother to her, albeit a pessimistic one, since her own mother’s death — but had made up her mind.

She was staying with Lyon. It was where she belonged.

She withdrew a beautiful mobile from the box, a series of birds circling an arm shaped to look like a tree. “I’ve never seen this before,” she said. “It’s so beautiful.”

“Your mother sewed those birds,” Lina said. “While she was pregnant with you.”

Kira looked at her. Lina was the only one who’d been with the family when Kira was a baby. Zoya had come later. “Really?”

The needlework was so detailed, the birds decorated with tiny colored stitches and sequins on their colorful wings.

Lina nodded. “I can still see her sitting by the fire with them in her hands.”

Kira could see it, and for a moment, she felt like the moment was very close, as if she might return to the sitting

room and find them still there, her father's head bent to a book, her mother working on the tiny stuffed birds.

There was a goldfinch and a blue jay, a cardinal and a hummingbird, even a snowy owl. She touched the last bird and something tugged at her chest.

It was a small falcon with a spotted chest and yellow feet.

Malen'kiy sokol...

As if her mother had known.

"I'll take this," Kira said. "I don't know where it will end up, but I want the baby to have it."

She noted the wistfulness in her voice and was glad it had escaped here, among friends, and not when she was with Lyon. She wanted to spend the last three months of her pregnancy getting ready for the baby, decorating a nursery, taking childbirth classes with Lyon.

Instead they were in limbo. Tonight, Lyon would join his men in breaching the water crib where Vadim and his men had been staging their takeover.

After that, who knew?

She felt Annie's hand close around hers.

"I'm sorry," her friend said. "This must be such a hard time to be pregnant."

Questions crowded Kira's mind. Would they be back in the Lake Forest house when the baby came? At the penthouse? Or would they be someplace else altogether?

Would Lyon survive his attempt at assassinating Vadim and his son? Or would his weakened body and traumatized mind be a fatal liability?

They were questions she didn't want to voice to Lyon. She already knew he wouldn't consider sending the men in his place.

He wanted to be there. To be the one to end the men who had tortured him.

Kira understood that.

Lyon needed her to be strong. To trust him and accept these challenges as part and parcel of being the pakhan's wife.

And she had prepared for this her whole life by being her father's daughter. She knew the sacrifices that were required of the pakhan's family, the danger they faced, and the uncertainty.

She would bear it without complaint.

To Lyon or anyone.

She forced a smile and squeezed Annie's hand. "I'm fine. I think my hormones are making me emotional. Either that, or we need more food."

She could tell from the look in Annie's eyes that she didn't buy it, but Annie was the best of friends precisely because she knew when to leave something well enough alone.

She got to her feet. "Come on, Lina. We may not be able to defeat Vadim Ivanov, but more food we can handle."

Lyon waited at the entrance to the tunnel with Markus and Alek, listening to the retreating footsteps of the other men. The scent was familiar — moist concrete and lake water, mold and rat shit.

It made him think of Sergei Ivanov, of the slow circle he'd made around Lyon before he'd used his knife to slice Lyon's chest.

That's what he'd smelled on Vadim's son: the tunnel leading to the water crib, the lake.

Something inside him — the part that still woke up at night in a cold sweat — wavered, and he forced himself to breathe through the panic that threatened to overwhelm him.

In a rare display of disagreement, Alek had argued about whether Lyon should be here at all. Lyon was weaker in body than he'd once been. It had only been two weeks since his rescue, and the damage that had been done to him by Vadim's men and the fact that he'd been tied to a chair for over a month would take more than fourteen days of food and exercise to correct.

But Lyon wouldn't leave this to the men. Not after all they'd already sacrificed for him. The organization was under

assault because Vadim wanted Lyon out of the way.

Vadim was his enemy. He would risk his life along with his men to see the encroacher vanquished.

In the end, he and Alek had settled the issue when Alek had posed a question Lyon hadn't wanted to answer: was Lyon strong enough that the men could count on him to save their lives if it came right down to it?

Lyon had been offended by the question, but honesty had quickly taken the place of indignation.

He didn't know.

He'd been back in the gym, working to rebuild his strength, but he was not yet as physically strong as he'd been before his kidnapping and imprisonment.

Finally, he'd agreed to a compromise. The strongest men would pave the way through the tunnels and into the water crib. Lyon would follow with Markus and Alek when most of the way had been cleared.

Lyon hated it, but he wasn't stupid, and he would not have the death of another soldier on his hands, especially not in an instance where he had the foresight to prevent it.

Lyon thought he heard the muffled thump of gunfire somewhere deep inside the tunnel. It forced him back to the present, the safest place for him to be.

"Update," Lyon said to Alek.

Lyon had opted not to wear a comms earpiece. He didn't want to hear every move the other men were making, every obstacle they had to overcome. This time, the details were a distraction he didn't need. There was only one thing that mattered: isolating Vadim and his son in the water crib and killing them both.

Lyon didn't need comms for that mission, not with Alek running interference.

Alek touched his earpiece, then looked at Lyon. "The boats are in position."

Lyon nodded.

The youngest and weakest of the men had been assigned to approach the crib by boat, providing a distraction for the other men working their way through the tunnels. Lyon had devised the strategy as a way to make up for the weakness of their army, which he feared was still too small even with help from the Syndicate and Roman's men.

While they circled the crib, baiting Vadim's men, a second team would breach the crib through the tunnels, using silencers to avoid alerting Vadim's entire army.

Surprise was the only advantage they had, and Lyon intended to use it.

Lyon wasn't worried about the men in boats taking gunfire. Vadim wouldn't want to bring the Marine Patrol or Coast Guard to the crib. His men would watch and wait, eventually chalking it up to joyriders out for a night ride.

Markus gazed into the tunnel entrance and focused on the chatter in his earpiece.

He turned to Lyon. "They're in."

"Let's move," Lyon said.

They started down the tunnel, Alek in front with his phone as a flashlight, Lyon behind him, Markus at the back. The tunnel was quiet except for the sound of dripping water and an occasional rustle Lyon assumed were rats.

It was surreal to realize that at some point, they crossed over from being under the city to being under the lake, and Lyon tried not to think about the fact that decades ago, water had rushed through these tunnels into the city.

He'd never been a man with phobias, but he felt out of balance, unmoored.

A stranger in his own mind.

He wasn't entirely sure who he was anymore, and he was grateful his body kept moving, a kind of psychological muscle memory at play, propelling him through the tunnel, keeping

his gun raised, even as his mind screamed that there was danger everywhere.

More muffled shots sounded ahead.

“At least they’re ours,” Markus said behind him.

He was likely right. Vadim had no reason to use silencers in the water crib. It had been abandoned for ages.

Then, as if to make a liar of him, gunfire rattled through the tunnel.

They picked up their pace, jogging through the two-mile long tunnel.

It started to feel interminable, like a cruel game in which the tunnel went on and on, never to deliver them to their destination.

Then, Lyon thought he could make out a faint light up ahead. He wondered if he was imagining it until Alek spoke.

“We’re almost there.”

The tunnel gradually lightened, although the illumination was dim. All at once, a barrage of gunfire sounded from up ahead. It went on and on, followed by shouts that got louder as the light got brighter.

“They have Sergei isolated with three men,” Alek said, reporting from what he was hearing in his earpiece. “They’re working on the steel door.”

The blood rushed in Lyon’s head, adrenaline giving him a welcome surge of strength, the promise of killing Sergei Ivanov delivering a familiar rush of anticipation.

He’d worked to rebuild his image, to show people a side that wasn’t all blood and violence, but this return to his more primal self wasn’t unwelcome. He would happily kill these men who had made him suffer, who had made Kira suffer.

They slowed down as they reached the opening of the tunnel, not wanting to barrel into a bad situation. A couple pops of gunfire were followed by the muffled shots of the

silenced weapons, and the clang of metal reverberated over them and down the tunnel.

Alek and Markus flanked the entrance to the tunnel, then moved simultaneously through the wide opening leading to the crib with Lyon on their heels.

Luka was holding his own with a tall, meaty man with sledgehammers for fists, but young Stefan was struggling with a tall lanky guard who was using a piece of metal pipe to choke the life out of him.

Alek rushed over to Luka.

Lyon lifted his weapon and aimed at the man choking Stefan. "I got this."

He aimed at the back of the man's head, silently apologizing for the face full of blood Stefan was about to get.

The man went down fast, leaving Stefan standing with his eyes wide, face dripping scarlet.

"You're good," Lyon said. "Come with us."

It took a second for the kid to move, but then he stepped over the body of his attacker and hurried to join Lyon and Markus.

"You okay?" Lyon asked him. "Still got your weapon?"

"It uh... it fell to the floor," Stefan said.

Alek fired on the man fighting Luka, and he hit the concrete floor with a dull thud.

"Get your gun," Markus said to Stefan. "We have to move."

He looked at Lyon while Stefan scrambled to find his gun on the floor where it had fallen. "They have him."

"Vadim?" Lyon said.

"Sergei," Markus said. "Vadim is holed up in the control room. Door has a lock like a safe. Has to be opened from the inside or with a key."

"Sergei will do," Lyon said. "Lead the way."

They were in a massive circular pit constructed of cinderblock and concrete — the holding tank, Lyon knew from the schematics they'd studied in preparation for their attack — and Markus led the way up a set of metal stairs to a platform that circled the pit.

Lyon followed with Stefan at his side, Alek in the back this time.

Markus moved with assurance, like he knew exactly where he was going, and Lyon realized again what an asset the man had been since Lyon had moved him up through the ranks.

Other than Alek and Rurik, there was no one Lyon would rather have at his side.

Six sets of doors provided exits from the holding tank. Markus led them through one set and they entered a concrete hall manned with Lyon's own men.

"You cleared this level?" Markus asked one of the younger men. Lyon thought his name was George.

He nodded, stiffening when he saw Lyon, awe shadowing his features.

"Thank you," Lyon said. "Good work."

The kid relaxed a little. "Last door on the left."

Lyon hesitated. "George, right?"

The kid nodded.

"Come with us," Lyon said.

"Me?" The kid looked equal parts shocked and terrified.

"Yes."

The kid fell into step behind them.

They approached an open doorway, a steel door hanging on its hinges, the handles and lock mechanisms clearly blown off. Two of Oleg's men flanked the door with their weapons drawn.

"Sergei Vadim is inside," one of them said as Lyon approached.

“Good work,” Lyon said.

He stepped through the doorway first, Alek falling behind him. Three more of Lyon’s men stood inside, all pointing their guns at Sergei Ivanov, sitting behind an old metal desk.

Several men lay dead on the floor — Sergei’s men, Lyon presumed.

Lyon stopped on the other side of the desk and looked at the man who had marked him with the knife. He’d seemed larger when Lyon had been tied to the chair that had been his prison. Then, Sergei had been amped, his eyes shining with a manic light that said he thought he was invincible.

He looked smaller now, shrunken into the old chair behind the desk, his expensive clothes and the watch that still shone on his wrist inadequate armor for what was to come.

Now, the light in his dark eyes one of fear.

Good. Lyon wanted him to be afraid.

“You know what’s worse than men like your father?” Lyon asked. “Men who take what belongs to someone else? Men who threaten woman and children, who instigate violence for nothing but greed?”

“Fuck you,” Sergei said, his voice shaking.

“I’ll answer for you,” Lyon said calmly. “What’s worse than that kind of man is the kind of man who hides behind him. The kind of man who is too much a coward to make his own way.” He looked at one of the men standing guarding the room. “Where are the weapons you confiscated from this piece of shit?”

One of the men handed Lyon a gun. “We found this on him too.” He reached into this pocket and opened his palm to reveal a knife.

The cuts on Lyon’s chest burned at the sight of it.

He took it, flipping it open and studying it.

The instrument of his torture. The instrument of his revenge.

Sergei must have known what was coming because he made a run for the door, getting all of three feet before one of Lyon's men shoved him back in the direction of the chair.

He went sprawling, but he jumped up quickly, panic in his eyes.

"Who are you to judge me?" Sergei screamed, his face turning red, sweat dripping from his brow. "You took the Chicago territory. You were nobody. You wouldn't have been made pakhan at all if you hadn't married that cunt of a wife."

"You will not speak of my wife," Lyon roared. Sergei shrunk back from him, and Lyon inhaled deeply, forcing himself to be calm. His appetite for blood would be sated soon, but he couldn't have the men thinking he'd lost control. "I executed a decades-long strategy to rule this city. I don't expect you to understand the difference between that and a violent overthrow, but you will pay for the pain you've caused my wife, and for your audacity in daring to threaten her."

"I'm sorry," Sergei said quickly. "My father — "

"Tie him up," Lyon said, without taking his eyes off Sergei. "And bring me a saw."

Lyon climbed another set of metal stairs, the rest of his men at his back. The water crib had been cleared and secured — all except for one room.

The control room.

Looking at the closed door guarded by the men, he understood why they'd waited for his instructions. This wasn't a door like the one behind which Sergei had hidden. That one had been steel too, but it had been of a standard thickness, the locks easily blown off by the semi-automatic weapons carried by Lyon's men.

This was the door to a vault. Because it was closed, Lyon couldn't tell its precise thickness, but the giant wheel that stood at its center — like that of a bank vault — gave him some indication that it wasn't an ordinary door.

It required a special key to open, and while Lyon could send for one of the bratva's experts in that area, doing so would take time.

More time meant more risk — that something could go wrong, that Marine Patrol or the Coast Guard would notice the activity on the crib and send men to investigate. He had men in

both organizations on the payroll, but there was no way to know if they would be able to mitigate the attention.

It would also draw the press, ambulance chasers who monitored police and marine channels hoping to get an exclusive on a fresh story.

It wasn't ideal, which was why he was glad he had another way.

He planted his feet in front of the door, Sergei's blood dripping from his face and shirt. "I have your son, Vadim. Open the door."

A pause. Then an accented voice he remembered from his first moment waking in the tunnels.

"That would be foolish, Lyonya." His voice was muffled by the steel door that separated them. "I'm sure you know this."

"Perhaps," Lyon said. He was calm, both to give Vadim the impression that he wasn't worried and because there was no reason not to be calm. Lyon had all the leverage. "Nevertheless, there's only one way you get to see your son, and that's if you open this door."

Another pause.

"Do you think I don't know you will kill me?" Vadim shouted, obviously working to make sure Lyon could hear him through the vault-like door.

"That is my intent," Lyon said. There was no point lying. "But that would be my intent if I used my men to crack this door as well. And who knows? Maybe your men can take me before I put a bullet in your brain. It doesn't really matter to me, but we both know there's no other way out. At least this way, you get to see your son one last time."

There were no windows inside the control room, no other exits besides the door that separated them.

This time he was met with silence.

Markus shifted on his feet. "Should we get —"

“Wait,” Lyon said.

He understood Markus’s impatience. Lyon saw something of himself in Markus, a part of him that enjoyed the violence of their work, that saw it as a perk rather than a drawback of the business.

The door creaked from the other side.

“Take out the men,” Lyon said quietly to his men. “But leave Vadim to me.”

They raised their weapons, and the door clanged to life, opening first an inch, then another.

Lyon waited as the men sprang into position in front of the ever-widening opening.

It was only open a couple of feet when the gunfire started. Lyon couldn’t see what was going on from his position, but he waited, staying out of the way, letting the men handle Vadim’s guards.

When the gunfire stopped, Markus and Alek stepped inside.

The door opened the rest of the way in a cacophony of creaking as the rusted hinges protested.

Vadim stood at the far end of the circular room, near a wall of buttons, levers, and small analog screens that looked like readouts for the crib’s inner workings.

“He’s been disarmed,” Alek said blandly.

Lyon walked into the room and crossed the expanse of concrete that separated him from Vadim, stopping when he was a couple feet away.

He’d expected to feel something when he finally came face to face with his tormentor.

Fury.

Misery.

Residual fear.

But he felt nothing at all.

He threw Sergei's hand, the Skeleton watch still attached to the bloody stump, at Vadim. "Your son begged like a pussy before he died."

Vadim's eyes widened in horror as his gaze dropped to Lyon's other hand, hanging at his side.

Lyon lifted it, throwing Sergei's head at Vadim. Then he raised his weapon and fired between the old man's eyes.

PART II

“You really don’t have to come with me,” Kira said, looking over at Annie in the passenger seat of Kira’s Mercedes.

“I know, but I’m bored out of my mind,” Annie said. “I could use a field trip. Besides you’ve been at the house alone almost every day this past week. You could probably use the company.”

“Oh, I could definitely use the company,” Kira said.

It had been a month since Lyon’s execution of Vadim and Sergei Ivanov, and it was still hard to believe it was over. Things were slowly returning to normal, Lyon working double time to bring the bratva’s interests in the city back under control, and Kira doing the same to get the house in Lake Forest completed.

Lyon still wasn’t talking about the trauma he’d suffered at the hands of Vadim’s men, and he’d only stopped requiring Kira to take a guard everywhere she went last week, but it felt like they might be on their way to something like peace.

“I’m excited to see the progress on the house,” Annie said as they approached the private driveway. “I haven’t been here in ages.”

“It’s really the primary bedroom and the nursery that have changed,” Kira said, making the turn.

She’d spent the last month selecting paint and wallpaper, furniture and bathroom fittings, window treatments and light fixtures. It had been a dizzying number of decisions to make in such a short time period, but she was determined to have the house complete in the next month so they could move in with some time to get settled before the baby came.

The work on the house had come at a price: she’d hardly had time to shop for the baby. If all went well — and so far, the doctor said they were on track — they would still have a month after moving into the house to prepare.

She could hardly wait to take a breath and enjoy the last of her pregnancy.

Annie sighed as they emerged from the tree-lined drive. “I may just have to move in here too.”

Kira understood the sentiment. The house loomed ahead, its facade freshly cleaned and sparkling under the sun, a fresh layer of stucco on the Tudor-style exterior. Kira had hired Peter to oversee the landscaping, and the lawn was lush and green, a handful of gardeners dotting the beds around the house as they planted shrubs and flowers.

Everything looked beautiful and alive.

Kira laughed. “No offense, but I think I’m ready to be alone with my husband.”

Annie pretended to huff. “Fine.”

“I’m surprised you haven’t moved out yet,” Kira said, pulling into the empty gravel parking area to one side of the house. “Aren’t you sick of Zoya?”

Kira had grown used to the banter of the two women, but she couldn’t imagine it was fun for Annie to be on the receiving end of so much criticism.

Annie rolled her eyes. “That old bat? Needling her makes my day.”

Kira laughed and shook her head. She turned the car off and opened her door to heave herself out of the driver's seat. "This will be quick, I promise."

Annie had convinced Kira they needed a lunch out and had made a reservation for them at 312, their favorite restaurant.

"That's fine," Annie said. "We have plenty of time before our reservation."

Kira stopped on their way to the front door to compliment the gardeners on their work, admiring the vibrant roses and peonies they were planting along the walkway. Together with the jasmine Kira had ordered, it was going to smell like paradise.

She was unsurprised to find one of Lyon's men on the porch. He seemed to have men everywhere, trying to be unobtrusive but keeping an eye on her anyway. She'd told him she didn't think it was necessary, but he'd insisted, and she didn't have the heart to press the point when she knew it made him feel better to know she and the baby were protected.

"Hello, George," she said to the fresh-faced guard. She hadn't remembered ever meeting him the first time Lyon introduced them, but he'd become a fixture at the Lake Forest house.

"Hello, Mrs. Antonov," he said nervously. "How are you today?"

She smiled. "I'm very well. Thank you for asking. How are you?"

"Me?" He looked stricken, his blue eyes wide, as if he didn't have the answer. "I'm, uh... I'm fine. Thank you."

He was too sweet for words, although she had no doubt he was armed and well-trained beneath that youthful exterior. Lyon would have it no other way.

"Can I get you anything from the house?" she asked. She kept the fridge stocked with drinks and the makings for sandwiches, and the pantry full of snacks, just in case any of the guards or gardeners got hungry or thirsty.

“No, ma’am.” he blushed down to the roots of his short blond hair. “Thank you.”

“I hope they have that special today,” Annie said, as Kira unlocked the door. “The stuffed snapper. It’s better than an orgasm.”

Kira laughed. “I think you need more orgasms in your life.”

Annie sighed. “From your lips to god’s ears.”

Kira closed the door behind her, set down her bag, and started for the stairs.

“Where are you going?” Annie asked.

“I need to see if they finished with the wallpaper in the baby’s room,” Kira said, her hand on the polished mahogany banister.

“But I want to see the living room,” Annie said.

“You saw the living room last time, remember? Nothing has changed,” Kira said.

Why was Annie acting so strangely?

“You had the moldings installed,” Annie said. “I haven’t seen them.”

It was true, the moldings — custom fabricated to match the historical period of the house — had been installed in the last week, although Annie had never shown any interest in such details.

Kira sighed and took her hand off the banister. “Okay, we’ll go see the moldings first. I promise they’re not that exciting though.”

“I’m sure they’re nicer than you realize,” Annie said, following Kira into living room.

“*SURPRISE!*”

The shout almost knocked Kira backwards, and Lyon rushed forward to grab her arm as shock gave way to understanding.

The living room was full of their friends and family, all of them beaming at Kira under a WELCOME, BABY banner that had been strung on the wall. Balloons in yellow and green bobbed against the living room's high ceilings, and a table near the window had been piled high with presents.

Kira held her hands to her chest as if that might stop the pounding of her heart. She turned to look at Annie. "You!"

Annie laughed. "I'm sorry! I had to get you here and I had to be with you. It was my job."

"But where are all the cars?" Kira asked, trying to piece together how they'd kept it a secret.

"That was my only job," Lyon said. "I rented a lot in town and everyone carpooled from there. We didn't want to spoil the surprise with twenty cars out front."

Kira turned to look at the group that had assembled in the living room. All their friends and family were there — Zoya and Lina and Peter, Rurik and Alek and Markus, Oleg and Luka and their wives and children and so many of the other brigadiers, even Lana, who was usually busy hobnobbing with socialites and celebrities.

"I can't believe you did this for me," she said. "For us."

"The newest member of the Antonov bratva must be welcomed properly," Nadia, Luka's wife said with a smile.

Kira shook her head, tears stinging her eyes. She hadn't allowed herself to wallow in the difficulty of her pregnancy — the early days when she hadn't been sure if Lyon would be happy, his kidnapping, the threat of Vadim — but it had been hard.

She'd missed her parents, had often felt alone, but this was proof she wasn't.

That she never had been.

She sniffed and wiped away a tear. "I'm sorry. This just means so much to me," she said. "You have no idea."

Lyon tightened his arm around her and dropped a kiss on the top of her head. "To us." He looked out over the crowd.

“This means so much to us.”

She looked up at him. “You were in on this!”

He smiled, and for a moment, the shadows that had lurked in his eyes since his rescue receded. “I just showed up. The planning was all to Annie.”

Kira turned and gave her a friend a tight hug. What had she ever done without Annie Kamenev? “Thank you for this.”

“I know it’s been hard,” Annie said, squeezing her back. “Now it’s time to celebrate.”

And celebrate they did, first with a catered lunch from 312, and then with presents and a gorgeous strawberry and whipped cream cake.

No one would allow Kira and Lyon to help, and they sat back while everyone played silly games and ate lunch, the children running through the house just like Kira had dreamed.

Soon, the great old house would be filled with the sound of their own children, and for the first time in a long time, it felt close enough to touch.

She was embarrassed by the generosity of the gifts bestowed on them. Money wasn’t a problem, but time had been, and she opened each gift with awe and gratitude that more than once threatened to overflow in tears.

There was even a gift from Ronan and Julia Murphy, and even more surprisingly, one from Damian Cavallo and his wife, Aria, and when she parted the tissue paper to reveal the softest bear she’d ever seen from FAO Schwartz, the card simply read RK.

Lyon had leaned over to whisper in her ear, “Roman.”

It was an embarrassment of riches, both in terms of the gifts bestowed on them and the love that filled the room. Her parents couldn’t be there, and Aksana — Lyon’s mother — wouldn’t have been welcome, but by the time Annie went to work with a few of the others to help clean up the mess, Kira knew their little family was surrounded by love.

They'd had a rough start. They'd had more than their share of challenges.

But she was starting to believe they were home free.

Roman walked through the doors of Basil's, a seedy nightclub in Brooklyn, and nodded at the bouncer standing near the door.

"S'up?" the guard said, touching a hand to his dark goatee. The metal in his face glinted in the multi-colored lights sweeping the room from the dance floor.

"What's the crowd look like tonight?" Roman asked.

"Big. Place is already packed."

Roman nodded and started through the crowd.

"Good luck," the bouncer called after him.

Roman hunched into his leather jacket. It wasn't necessary here — one of the reasons he loved the place — but old habits died hard.

He approached the bar and waited. The guy behind it was in the middle of a flirtatious conversation with a curvy blond and was in no hurry to help Roman.

In any other situation, Roman would have been angered by the slight, and he would have made that anger felt. He might not be in charge of the New York bratva — yet — but he was still a high-ranking brigadier.

But here at Basil's, he enjoyed his role as one of many patrons, one of many men who drew a crowd in the basement.

The guy didn't know Roman from Adam, but Roman knew him: Roberto Ortega, single, twenty-eight years old, no dependents, lived four blocks from Basil's. He could have pulled the guy's social security number if he'd wanted.

Perks of owning the place, although nobody who worked here knew that was the case.

He waited, taking in the sea of writhing bodies on the dance floor, the mating rituals happening all around him. It had never been his thing, although he'd had his share of casual sex. He didn't have the patience for the dance. His hookups were quick and dirty — emphasis on the word dirty.

He never let any woman believe it was more than it was, a quick fuck he'd forget about just as soon as he left their bed — and it was always their bed. He wasn't stupid enough to bring any woman into his own.

“Hey,” the bartender said, glancing up at him and slowly straightening with an apologetic look at the blond. “The usual?”

Roman nodded and the bartender set him up with two shots of tequila. Roman preferred to think of it as preventative pain medication.

He downed the shots one after the other and left a twenty on the bar. “Thanks.”

But the bartender had refocused on the blond, who from the look of things, was equally enamored.

For tonight anyway.

Roman cut a path through the crowd toward the back of the club. The tequila was already at work in his body, loosening the ever-present tension that was coiled there unless he was fighting or fucking.

He was a big man. Two shots of tequila were just enough to smooth out the edges without taking away his edge.

He nodded to a few regulars, glad none of them stopped him for a chat, and stopped in front of a door painted black to blend in with the club's back wall. Adam, one of the regular bouncers, was there, legs planted two feet apart, hands crossed in front of his body.

"You're pushing it," Adam said, staring down at him. "They're almost ready to start."

Roman shrugged and the guy nodded for him to enter.

He opened the door and started down the narrow stairs leading to the basement. The walls glowed purple thanks to the LED lights tucked into the moldings

The door slammed shut behind him at the top of the stairs.

Music played from below, growing louder as he reached the bottom of the stairwell. He came to another door, this one unmanned, and opened it.

The crowd didn't look very different from the one upstairs. In fact, a casual observer might think this was just another floor of the same club.

That casual observer would be wrong.

Roman made a quick right, not wanting to attract attention and unwanted conversation. He ducked into the dingy locker room, haphazardly set up by knocking down the wall between the men's restroom and a small storage area.

He could have made it nicer. God knew, he had the money.

But that would defeat the purpose of his purchase of Basil's, which to put it simply, was to help him forget the other part of his life. The part filled with custom-made suits and chauffeured cars, with five-star restaurants and luxury apartments.

He didn't mind the privilege. Privilege meant choices. Privilege meant freedom.

Usually.

But his was attached to his father, and that made it repugnant to him.

For him, there was no privilege without his father.

And it's not like he could walk away from the *bratva*. It's not like he even wanted to.

He was glad the locker room was empty. Sometimes he had to change alongside his opponent, which wouldn't have been a problem except that the other men almost always wanted to talk while they got ready.

Roman didn't come here to talk.

He pulled off his jacket and hung it on one of the lockers, then peeled off his T-shirt. He left the jeans on, but took off his shoes. Then he sat on the chipped wooden bench he'd found on the curb and had screwed to the floor.

Inhale, exhale.

Let it all go.

His father. The *bratva*. All of it.

That's why he came to Basil's every Saturday night.

The volume on the music was lowered outside the locker room.

Roman stood, waiting for the crowd to quiet.

A few seconds later he heard the familiar voice of Kellen, the event's MC, echo through the subpar microphone they used for this purpose.

"Welcome back to another Saturday night at Basil's! How are you all feeling tonight?"

The crowd cheered, and Roman hopped on his feet, feeling their energy even through the walls of the locker room.

"Glad to hear, because we have a *brawl* for you *tonight!*"
The crowd cheered again.

Roman was growing impatient, but this was part of it. This part of Basil's was VIP only, the cover charge over a thousand dollars a head with a six-month waiting list. They paid for a show, and the MC hyping them up was part of the experience.

“Tonight, we have the Black Serpent on one side of the ring. Give it up for my man here!”

Roman snorted. Kellen was using the term ring loosely.

Very loosely.

The Serpent — Roman could easily have found out his real name, but why bother? — was clearly already in the club, soaking up the energy of the crowd.

“Battling the Serpent, we have your favorite,” the MC roared into the mic, “the Gladiatorrrrr!”

He drew out the word like this was a prime-time fight in Vegas, instead of a dirty underground brawl where almost anything went.

The crowd roared, and Roman pushed through the locker room door into the assembled crowd. It took a second for everyone to realize he was on his way into the clearing that had been made at the center of the club. When they did, he felt their attention swivel his way, the energy jolting through his body like a bolt of lightning.

The rest of his life dropped away as he took his place next to Kellen.

It’s what he loved about coming here. Getting ready to fight, there were no thoughts of his father. No plotting about how to wrest control of the bratva from his grasp. No concern for whether or not he should marry Valeriya Orlov to please him.

There was just brute force. Sweat. Blood. Pain.

No one cared about the scars on his body. Here, they were a badge of honor.

“You know the rules,” Kellen was talking into the microphone, but the words were directed at Roman and Serpent. “Just kidding. There are none! We want to see blood!”

“Blood, blood, blood,” the crowd chanted.

The DJ cranked the music and Kellen stepped back out of the way of the makeshift fighting arena.

And just like that, the fight had begun. No gloves, no tape on the hands, not even a mouth guard.

If you weren't willing to risk your fucking teeth, you didn't belong at Basil's on a Saturday night.

Roman circled the other man, his gaze laser-focused on his giant opponent. He would let the other man hit him a bit. It would tire the man out, but that wasn't the point.

Roman liked the pain, had made it his friend.

He smiled when the first punch landed.

Lyon sat behind Kira in the big soaking tub and stroked her stomach, slick with water and bubbles. The cuts on his chest still stung when she leaned against him, but it was more than worth the sweet press of her back against his skin.

He'd turned out the lights and lit candles, and two glasses sat on a small table near the tub — bourbon for him and sparkling cider for Kira.

The baby shower had been a success, and he was flush with the pleasure of his small part in planning something that had made Kira so happy.

“Were you really surprised?” he asked.

She laughed, the sensation a sweet echo in his chest. “I’m not sure I’ve ever been more surprised,” she said. “Except maybe when I found out the Lion had a softer side.” He growled and buried his face in her neck until she laughed and squirmed in his arms. “That tickles!”

“Annie worked on the shower for weeks,” Lyon said. “And they say I’m a tough boss.”

Kira smiled. “She’s the best friend I’ve ever had. I’ll miss her when we move into the house.”

“If I know Annie — and since she’s been underfoot for the last six weeks, I think I do — you’ll be seeing her often,” Lyon said.

“I hope so.” He watched as she played with the bubbles in the tub, scooping them into her hands and then blowing them. “I’ve come to like our little family.”

Lyon chuckled, thinking of Rurik and Zoya, Alek and Annie. “It’s a strange family.”

“Those are the best kinds of all,” Kira said.

“I’m ready for this one to join us,” Lyon said, resting his hands on the smooth bump of her stomach.

“Me too,” Kira said, turning her head for a kiss.

He happily obliged, lingering over the honeyed taste of her lips, then sank back against the tub. He was ready. Ready to build the family he’d always dreamed of with the woman who’d changed his life.

Who’d changed him.

He’d visited every one of the bratva’s business interests in the past month, shaking hands where friendliness was in order, making threats when it wasn’t, making it clear that the organization was in hand.

He’d brought on over a hundred new soldiers, assigned them to the various crews, told the brigadiers to watch for talent and ambition, for integrity and loyalty. Lyon had big plans for the bratva, big dreams.

Those dreams required more men, more capital, more resources, which was why their cyberlab was already under way in the warehouse by the river. Lyon had finally moved out all the old factory equipment, making room for a state-of-the-art lab that would occupy half of the ground floor.

He’d talked at length with Damian about what was required, and then with Christophe Marchand, one of the Syndicate’s managing partners who lived in Paris. Marchand had a lab of his own, one that had been in place even when

Raneiro Donati ran the Syndicate, and the other man had rounded out Cavallo's suggestions with several of his own.

All of it made him feel like the worst was behind them. Like he could concentrate on the baby and Kira.

"Back still hurt?" he asked.

"A little." Lyon slipped his hands down to rub her back, and she let out a soft moan that instantly had his cock hard.

"That feels so good. What about you?" she asked, hunching forward to give him better access to her back.

"What about me?"

She hesitated. "How are you feeling?"

He knew she wasn't talking about his back. Or even about the baby.

A steel door in his mind closed shut. It was a familiar door, the one he'd used to compartmentalize when he'd been held prisoner by Vadim.

He was free, but he'd found his life was simpler when it remained closed.

He let his hands slide around Kira's belly and up to her breasts.

"What are you doing, my love?" Kira asked.

"I'm trying to turn on my wife," Lyon said, cupping her breasts. His cock was rigid against her ass.

"I think you're trying to avoid the question," she said gently.

"Not at all," he said. "I'm just a man who wants to fuck his beautiful wife."

It was a lie of course. He didn't want to talk about his imprisonment and torture.

Didn't want to relive it.

The possibility caused a mild panic to run through his veins, a less intense version than the one he felt when he woke up at night, gasping and sweating, trying not to wake Kira.

And what was the point? He'd survived. He was here, with his wife and their unborn child, the future a banner of promise unfurled before them.

She sighed. "I'm not going to say that doesn't feel good."

He wasn't fooled. His wife had a will of iron. She wouldn't be so easily distracted — not even by the promise of sex, as much as she loved it — if she'd been determined to get him to talk.

She was giving him another reprieve.

"Then just let it feel good," he murmured, sliding his hands lower in the bath water.

"I know what you're doing," she said, tipping her head back against his shoulder.

"Trying to satisfy my insatiable wife?"

She laughed softly. "It's not her fault. She has a very sexy husband."

"Does she?" Lyon asked, his hands sliding between her thighs.

"Mmmm-hmmm," she said, her breath turning shallow. "He's very good with his hands."

"Is that so?"

"And his mouth," she continued. "And his cock."

He fucking loved it when she talked dirty, the words spilling from her pretty mouth.

She moaned as he stroked her clit lazily with two of his fingers.

His cock, nestled against her pillowy ass, grew harder, and he slid his fingers through her folds until he found her opening, slick and hot.

"You're always so wet, malen'kiy sokol." He slipped two of his fingers inside her tight channel.

She gasped as he finger-fucked her, brushing his thumb over her clit in circles while she moved her hips in time to his

rhythm, her breath hitching as she reached for release.

The friction of her ass against his cock had him close too. He knew what it would feel like to slide into her, to be caressed by her heat.

He closed his teeth on her soapy shoulder and bit down, then turned his head to murmur in her ear. “Come for me so I can fuck you, wife.”

She cried out, the sound echoing off the tile in the bathroom, her channel tightening around his fingers as her body shook with the tremors rolling through it.

He waited until he’d wrung every last spasm from her body, then held onto her hips and lifted her onto his lap. Normally, she would have turned around to face him, but this would be more comfortable for her with the baby.

They both laughed as water sloshed out of the tub.

“This is going to be messy,” she said as he positioned the head of his rigid cock at her entrance.

“I don’t care.” He thrust into her hard and fast.

She gasped, gripping onto the edge of the bathtub while he became fully seated in her.

“Oh my god,” she said, the words coming out in a low groan.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Never better,” she said, rocking her hips to grind on him.

“Fuck,” he groaned into her wet back. “You feel so good.”

The angle was different for them, and he savored the new sensation, the way he felt balls deep inside her, as if the head of his cock was pressed up against her cervix.

He held onto her hips for leverage, pushing up and into her while she worked with him, meeting him thrust for thrust. He was already close to coming, the pressure building fast and furious at the center of his body.

He slipped his hand around to her pussy and found her clit again to make sure she came with him. He stroked it roughly while he fucked her and she gasped into the room.

“Lyon...”

“Come with me, darling.”

Their movements were fast and frenzied, the water spilling over the edge of the tub, but Lyon didn't care. There was only her — her body and her warmth, a refuge from everything he didn't want to think about, didn't want to remember.

He increased the pressure on her clit and felt her tip into her orgasm, crying out as she shuddered around his cock.

It was all he needed to follow her over the edge, and he came fast and hard, his own cries sounding animalistic, grunting as he pounded into her again and again, wanting to prolong the release for them both, wanting to extend the moment when nothing existed but her.

He didn't stop until she went limp on top of him, her head against his shoulder, damp strands of her hair falling out of the knot she'd put it in for the bath.

Then he slid his arms around her stomach, cradling her and their child, feeling like the luckiest man alive in spite of all that had happened.

Or maybe because of it.

She lifted her head and looked at the floor. “We made a mess.”

“Are you saying it wasn't worth it?” he asked, kissing her velvety cheek.

“Never in a million years.”

“Good,” he said. “Let me get out and clean up so you don't slip, then I'll help you out of the tub.”

He rose from the bath, stepped onto the soggy bath mat, and looked down at her. She had her head tipped back against the tub, her eyes closed as if she were falling asleep.

There would be no more talk of feelings or trauma tonight.

And that was just the way he liked it.

Kira was swimming through a delicious dream. She couldn't grasp the details, but it was warm and gentle.

She felt safe.

Then, all at once, a shrill ringing jolted her out of the ether in which she'd been floating.

She sat up with a start. "What...?"

"It's the phone," Lyon said. "It's okay. Go back to sleep."

It wasn't unheard of for Lyon's phone to ring in the middle of the night — it hadn't been for hers either when he'd been gone — but it wasn't common either.

She wasn't going back to sleep.

She caught Alek's name on the phone before Lyon answered the call.

"What is it?"

Kira couldn't hear what was being said, but Alek sounded agitated, and Alek was rarely agitated.

"I'll be down in fifteen minutes," Lyon said.

"What is it?" Adrenaline had flooded Kira's body. She was in full fight-or-flight mode, a deep feeling of unease seeping

through her body.

“Someone hijacked one of the drivers making the delivery to Cicero. He’s been beaten pretty badly. He’s at Trinity, by the Port.”

She blinked as he jumped out of bed and tried to make sense of it all. “But... Vadim and Sergei are dead. Musa is dead. Who...?”

She trailed off, almost afraid to ask the question in its entirety, as if doing so would conjure a new enemy when that couldn’t be possible.

“I don’t know,” Lyon said, hurrying to the closet. “But I have to go.”

She got out of bed, albeit a bit slower than her husband. “I’m going with you.”

Lyon rushed through Trinity hospital with Kira and Alek at his side, his mind racing. It didn't make sense. It had to be a fluke, a coincidence. Lyon would reach Oleg, the driver's brigadier, and the other man would tell him this was the work of a bunch of street punks or a personal vendetta against the driver.

They emerged on the fifth floor and started down the hall toward a group of men clustered at the end of it.

"I'll join you in a bit," Kira said, peeling off to sit with a woman huddled in a chair in the small waiting room.

The driver's wife, Lyon assumed.

The nurses gave them a curious glance as they passed the nurses' station but didn't bother asking questions. Lyon assumed Markus had greased the wheels to keep everybody out of their business. That lubrication would extend to the local police, who wouldn't make a fuss when the driver opted not to fill out a police report.

"Tell me," Lyon said as he reached the men.

"Bud picked up the shipment, as usual," Oleg said. The old man looked tired, his face sagging, shadows under his eyes. He was old for a brigadier, and they'd all been through a lot in the past few weeks. "He was stopped at a red light on his way

to Cicero when two men opened the cab of the truck. They dragged him out, beat him, and left with the oil.”

Lyon raked a hand through his hair. “Did he recognize the men? Has anyone given him trouble before this?”

Oleg shook his head. “Not since Vadim was...” He looked around to make sure no one was listening, then left the rest unsaid anyway.

“It doesn’t make sense,” Alek said next to Lyon.

“Could some of Vadim’s men — the ones who were left — have mobilized on their own?” Markus asked.

“I don’t know,” Lyon said. But that didn’t feel right. Vadim’s loyalists were with him in the crib, and Lyon’s men had left no one alive. After dumping their bodies in the deepest part of the lake, it was as if they’d never existed.

Vadim certainly had men on his side who weren’t at the crib on the night Lyon had killed him and Sergei, but they wouldn’t have been high-level enough to mobilize on their own after Vadim’s death, and that’s if they even had the motivation to bother without someone leading the charge.

“So... a coincidence then?” Markus asked, echoing one of the possibilities that had run through Lyon’s head a few minutes before.

Lyon shook his head. “I don’t know.”

None of it felt right, and he had the sense of being trapped in a nightmare. The only thing worse than having another enemy to fight was not knowing who that enemy was — or if they had an enemy at all.

He turned his attention to the injured man. “How is Bud?”

Now that Lyon had a name, he remembered the man, in his early thirties, with a wife and toddler.

“He’ll survive,” Oleg said. “Thank god. But he’s got a skull fracture and a concussion, plus a broken arm. He won’t be driving — or doing anything — for a while.”

Lyon nodded. “Tell him he’ll be paid while he recovers, and of course, his medical bills will be covered.”

“Thank you,” Oleg said. “He’ll appreciate it.”

“I’ll speak to him,” Lyon said. He was preparing to enter the man’s room when Alek’s phone rang.

Alek looked at the display, worry knitting his brows when he saw the name. “It’s Luka.”

Lyon gestured at him to answer the call.

“Yeah?” Alek said, his eyes on Lyon. He listened for a few seconds. “Hold on.”

He muted the call. “Two more trucks were commandeered, both in Luka’s territory, and that club on Division was robbed.”

Lyon paced away from them. “Motherfucker...”

It was Saturday night, and the club, a high-end spot for nightlife, had to have been packed. They also paid the bratva for protection, something every other criminal organization in the area knew.

Alek looked at his phone, confusion shadowing his features. “Luka, I’ll call you back,” Alek said into the phone before taking another incoming call. “Talk to me, Boris.”

Lyon felt the news like a coming storm.

“I’ll call you back,” Alek said into the phone. He looked at Lyon. “Diner on 68th was robbed. Owner was there and was beaten up pretty badly.”

“Customers?” Lyon asked.

Customers made things more difficult. They meant police reports and witnesses, attention that was bad for the organization.

Alek hesitated. “A few.”

“Fuck,” Lyon walked away, the details swirling in his mind, trying to get ahold of the pieces.

Trying to make it make sense.

They didn't know enough. That was the first problem.

He walked back to where Alek still stood with Markus, who had been unusually quiet. Lyon didn't blame him. What could any of them say?

“Get the brigadiers to the warehouse,” Lyon said, heading for the door to the truck driver's hospital room. “I'll be ready to leave in five minutes.”

He needed to check on the driver who'd had the shit beat out of him, let him know the *bratva* was here for him and his family, that he would be supported.

Then he needed to find out what the fuck was going on.

It was after ten in the morning when Kira finally returned to the apartment. She was exhausted in every sense of the word, and she kicked off her shoes at the door.

A big bouquet of flowers sat on the console table near the elevator. It must have arrived early that morning, and Kira idly plucked the card out of the mass of roses and other flowers.

So very sorry I couldn't make the baby shower. Wishing you warm congratulations on your impending new arrival.

Ivan

She made a sound of disgust and returned the card to the bouquet. The nerve of the man. Annie must have invited him to the baby shower, which made sense given that the only people who knew about Ivan's earlier betrayal of Lyon were Kira, Alek, and Rurik.

She would dispose of the flowers later, when she wasn't seeing double from lack of sleep.

She placed a hand on Rurik's arm as he started down the hall. "I'll make coffee and some breakfast."

"You should sleep." He was, as always, a man of few words.

“I will,” she said, “after we eat.”

He fell in reluctantly behind her.

Annie was already awake and sitting at the table in pajamas, and she jumped up to wrap Kira in a hug.

“Oh, my god,” she said. “You poor thing. You must be so exhausted.”

“I am,” Kira said. “And hungry.”

“Let me make something.” Annie pulled away and started for the kitchen.

“I’ll do it,” Kira said. “I’ve been sitting for hours. I need to move. Sit, Rurik. I’ll get you some coffee.”

She busied herself starting the coffee — a pot this time, not the single cups they used most days — and pulling ingredients from the fridge for French toast and eggs.

Her mind was awlirl with everything that had happened in the past few hours. Lyon had left the hospital with the men shortly after they arrived, but he’d waited until Rurik could join them so Kira had protection. He didn’t know what was going on — no one did — and they needed more information to find out.

She’d stayed with Tasha Morozov, Bud’s wife, while the doctor had seen her husband, trying to ease the other’s woman’s mind, bringing her coffee and food, and keeping her company.

By the time Rurik had driven Kira home, she was both exhausted and strangely wired. She needed a big breakfast and then a nice long sleep.

“Where did you get off to last night?” Zoya said, entering the kitchen. She was already dressed and looking like she’d been up for hours, her hair pulled back into its tight gray bun.

“There was a problem with one of the men,” Kira said. “Well, more than one actually.”

She filled them in as she cracked eggs into two different bowls, one for the French toast and one for the scrambled eggs

she would make to go with the bacon. Here, she didn't have to worry about confidentiality. The people in this room were among her most trusted allies, and she knew no one would say a word outside of this circle.

"I don't understand," Annie said when Kira was done. "If Musa and Vadim are dead — and we know they are — who could be behind these attacks?"

"That's the question Lyon and the other men are trying to answer," Kira said.

She'd hated saying goodbye to him at the hospital, had hated the subtle slope of defeat in his shoulders that was probably invisible to everyone but her.

She flashed back to their bath the night before. Had she imagined the moment of hesitation when she'd asked him how he was feeling? As if he might be close to opening up to her about the trauma he'd suffered at the hands of Vadim's men?

She'd been patient, giving him time to come to her when he was ready, letting him use sex to avoid talking about his feelings.

But she didn't intend to let it last forever. They had to talk — really talk — before the baby came, as much as Lyon clearly wanted to avoid it. If he didn't confront the trauma that still woke him up at night (he thought she didn't know), it would eat away at him, a poison with the power to undermine the closeness they'd fought so hard for and the family they were building together.

This newest problem wouldn't help matters. It would only allow Lyon to bury himself in work, in what could be a very real threat to all he'd built.

She let her mind wander while she melted butter on the cooktop's built-in griddle and watched Rurik try to concentrate on the paper while Annie prattled on as if he were listening.

"That one's going to get a bullet in the brain if she doesn't shut up," Zoya muttered as she unloaded the dishwasher.

"Stop it!" Kira hissed, swatting at Zoya's arm.

She dipped thick slices of bread in an egg, cream, and cinnamon mixture while she considered how she could help. She hated feeling helpless while Lyon was so worried, but this wasn't a problem that could be fixed by inviting all the wives to brunch or setting up a meeting with Ronan Murphy and the Syndicate.

Although...

She flipped the first pieces of French toast and considered the possibilities.

She could talk to Aksana. Lyon's mother had come here working with Vadim, had been paid handsomely for worming her way into Lyon's life and passing along information about him.

She hated the thought of having to talk to the woman — she was a truly vile person and an even worse mother to Lyon — but maybe she could find out something that would help, or worst case, catch Aksana in a lie that might be telling for Lyon.

“What are you plotting?” Zoya asked, pausing in her movements to narrow her eyes at Kira.

“What?” Kira affected an air of innocence. Zoya knew her too well, had seen her through too many years of turmoil and secrets. “I don't know what you're talking about. I'm just making breakfast.”

Lyon turned the cup of coffee in his hands, his mind churning as the sun rose over the city beyond the diner's windows.

He was grateful for the silence of his companions. Anything they said would be a platitude designed to blunt the truth.

Someone was still out to overthrow the bratva.

He took a drink of the coffee and grimaced. It was quite possibly the worst cup of coffee he'd ever had, bitter and mean on his tongue. Maybe the people who had robbed the diner had done so in retaliation for the terrible coffee.

He stifled a maniacal laugh.

He was tired.

Their waitress, a fifty-something bombshell with curly red hair and a name tag that read Sue, stopped by the edge of the table with the carafe in her hand.

"Get you more coffee?"

"Yes, please," Markus said, his smile wolfish. He was all of about thirty-five, but Lyon couldn't blame him for his interest in the blue-eyed beauty.

Sue had been there when the place had been robbed but hadn't batted an eye when Lyon had arrived with Alek and Markus, unlike the owner who hadn't stopped sweating and was still cowering in the kitchen like the thieves might return at any moment.

Lyon wished it would be so easy. At least he'd have a shot at identifying his enemy.

But he already knew they wouldn't return, certainly not with Lyon, Alek, and Markus occupying a booth in the back — away from the window, just in case — and probably not at all.

If history were any precedent, and it usually was, they'd attack different interests next time — but they would keep coming. After talking to the brigadiers at the warehouse, Lyon could draw no other conclusion but that this had been an intentional assault on the Antonov bratva.

“How about you, hon?”

He looked up to find that Sue was staring at him expectantly, and he wondered how long she'd been waiting.

“No, thank you,” Lyon said.

She nodded and sashayed her way back to the counter where a dignified looking man in a suit and tie was demolishing a stack of pancakes in between gulps of chocolate milk.

“We can't stop them if we can't find them,” Lyon said. “And we can't find them if we can't identify them.”

“We can assign partners to the drivers,” Markus said. “Armed, of course. And we can assign guards to other high-probability targets — clubs, restaurants...”

“We'd need more men,” Alek said.

“We don't have them,” Lyon said. He could not — would not — ask Roman Kalashnik or the Syndicate for further help.

“We could get them,” Alek said.

Lyon looked at him. His friend looked as tired as Lyon felt. It was more than the late night. They'd had plenty of those. It was nearly a year of constant turmoil.

“Not the best time to be recruiting,” Lyon said.

“Or it's the best time of all,” Markus said, downing his coffee and looking hopefully at Sue, chatting up the businessman at the counter.

Lyon thought about it. There were always young hopefuls — guys who thought being part of the bratva was glamorous, that they'd be set up with a mansion, a hot blonde, and a pile of coke in no time — hanging around the brigadiers.

So far, Lyon had been more intentional with his recruiting.

More careful.

But they didn't have the luxury of caution.

“So we bring in a bunch of shestyorkas,” Lyon said, using the Russian term for associate, the lowest man in the bratva hierarchy. “We pair them with the soldiers we trust, put them on guard duty around the city.”

Alek rubbed at the blond stubble on his chin. “It's not the worst idea.”

“It's not the best either, but it's the only one we have.” Lyon tried the coffee again, if only to give him something to do with his hands, then quickly regretted it. It was worse than he remembered.

“I'll get to work on it,” Alek said, “ask around, see if we can round up twenty rookies.”

Lyon nodded, threw some cash on the table, and stood. “I need to sleep.”

Alek and Markus rose to their feet and they started for the door. By the time Lyon and Alek stepped outside into the early morning air, they'd lost Markus. Lyon could see him at the counter, flirting with Sue.

Lyon wished him luck.

“Fuck,” Alek said, looking around.

“I couldn’t agree more,” Lyon said, leaning back to stretch.

His gaze snagged on the traffic cams attached to the street lights, and an idea formed in his mind.

The locations that had been hit all had one thing in common: none of them had working cameras. They were either broken or they were non-existent, as with the nightclub, which had a private sex club on the second and third floors.

Whoever was behind this attack on the Antonov bratva had chosen the locations carefully, ensuring they wouldn’t be captured on camera. Lyon had assumed it was a dead end.

Now, he wondered.

“How much of the lab does Kofi have set up?” he asked Alek.

“Not sure how to quantify that,” Alek said. “I wouldn’t know a finished cyberlab from a hole in the ground.”

Lyon pulled his eyes away from the traffic cams and looked at his friend. “Think he could access the traffic cams around the hits?”

Realization dawned in Alek’s eyes. “You think if we can access the surrounding cameras we can get a bead on these guys?”

“I’m thinking it’s worth a try,” Lyon said, already heading for the car.

“I got it!” Markus said, emerging triumphantly from the diner.

Alek yawned. “Got what?”

“Sue’s number,” Markus said as if there was no more precious commodity.

“Hurry it up,” Lyon called back to them. “I want to get to the warehouse.”

“What about sleep?” Markus asked, trotting to the Rover.

“Sleep is for the weak,” Lyon said, “We have work to do.”

Kira made her way through the lobby of the Waldorf and headed for the front desk. The hotel was boutique in size, but it more than made up for it in atmosphere. The lobby was hushed and refined, with soaring ceilings and a serene mix of modern and classical decor.

She stepped up to the front desk and was greeted by a young woman in a gray suit jacket. “Welcome to the Waldorf Astoria. Checking in?”

“No,” Kira said. “I’m actually here to see one of your guests.”

“Of course,” the woman said, reaching for a phone hidden behind the white marble counter. “Name?”

“Aksana Antonov,” Kira said.

Her mother-in-law’s name left a bad taste in her mouth. She’d been insufferable — alternately disinterested and demanding, apathetic and critical — during the weeks she’d stayed with Lyon and Kira at the penthouse.

But it was her treatment of Lyon, as a boy and as a man, that pushed Kira to kick the woman out of the apartment and put her up at the Waldorf. Her disloyalty in helping Vadim had

been damaging, but her coldness toward Lyon was unforgivable.

She had a flash of the photograph she'd found tucked away in his closet: a younger Aksana in a printed wrap dress, staring into the camera as if there under duress, holding the hand of a small boy with empty eyes.

Lyon and his mother in Russia, before they'd come to America.

Kira still felt like she'd been punched in the chest when she thought of it.

The front desk clerk was murmuring into the phone, her voice too soft for Kira to make out the words, and Kira suddenly wondered if her mother-in-law would turn her away, refuse to speak to her.

They hadn't exactly left off on good terms.

The clerk set the phone down and looked past Kira to the bank of elevators at the end of the hall. "Last elevator, fourth floor. Ms. Antonov is in suite 412. She's expecting you."

"Thank you," Kira said.

She made her way across the lobby, nerves fluttering in her stomach along with the soft kicks of the baby. She was wearing one of the dresses Henry and Lydia, the stylists who'd come to the hotel in New York, had helped her choose, and she felt confident in spite of the coming confrontation with Lyon's mother.

She hadn't told Lyon about her plans to talk to Aksana. He'd only try to talk her out of it — or worse, insist on coming with her — and she didn't want to give him anything else to think about.

She emerged from the elevator onto the fourth floor and made her way to suite 412. She knocked before she had time to change her mind.

She was getting ready to knock again — keeping her waiting was undoubtedly Aksana's way of exerting her control over Kira — when the door opened.

Her mother-in-law stood in the doorway, her black hair still lush and loose around her shoulders, her makeup impeccably applied. Her pale multi-colored skirt suit was Chanel, in the classic deconstructed style, paired with a pair of four-inch nude heels that were probably Louboutin.

She studied Kira triumphantly, and Kira had to fight not to shrink under the other woman's gaze.

You are the Lion's wife. You are the falcon.

You are Kira Baranov Antonov.

"Aksana," she said, relieved to hear her voice sound crisp and businesslike. "Thank you for seeing me."

"It is not every day the Lion's wife asks for an appointment," Aksana said in thickly accented English. "I'm curious, if nothing else."

The last part was a dismissal, a way to make it clear Kira was as interesting to Aksana as the garbage trucks that rolled through the city night and day.

"May I come in?" Kira asked, tired of standing at the door.

Aksana opened the door wider and Kira stepped into the living room of the suite. It wasn't the largest suite at the Waldorf, but Aksana was here — had been here for months — on Lyon's dime, and it was luxurious and well-appointed, the color palette a soothing gray and white.

The door was open to the balcony, a summer breeze fluttering the sheer draperies hanging on one side.

"You've gotten rather... *big* since I saw you last," Aksana said, walking toward the bar. "You must be due very soon. Pregnancy is so hard on a woman's body. We're never quite the same afterward."

It was a criticism, not an observation, but Kira wasn't rising to the bait, and she had no intention of giving Aksana details about her pregnancy.

"Why are you still here?" Kira asked.

“My son has generously offered to provide for me as long as I’m in town,” she said, her back still to Kira as she poured herself a drink. “Motherhood is such a trial. I thought I may as well enjoy one of its few perks.”

Kira shouldn’t have been surprised by the other woman’s willingness to take advantage of Lyon’s generosity while simultaneously criticizing him, but somehow, she still was.

Aksana never failed to gall her.

“And yet, I find it hard to believe you would stay in Chicago simply for a free suite at the Waldorf.” Kira eyed the huge pearl earrings in Aksana’s ears, the perfect strand around her throat. “You seem to be doing just fine.”

Aksana stared at her. “Give me a difficult positional game, I will play it.”

It was an unusual thing to say. Then again, Aksana was an unusual woman.

“Is that what you think this is?” Kira asked. “A game?”

Aksana smirked. “My dear, if you think it’s not, you’re the one who is mistaken.”

“Vadim Ivanov is dead. And yet, you remain in Chicago a month after his death. I want to know why,” Kira said.

She knew Aksana was playing an unseen part in the attacks on the bratva, but she didn’t know how, and she didn’t want to give the woman the satisfaction of thinking they were worried.

Aksana’s expression hardened. “I don’t owe you — or my son — anything.”

Kira straightened. This conversation had been pointless. She didn’t know why she’d bothered except to alleviate her own sense of helplessness.

She turned to go, rage blooming in the pit of her stomach like a poisonous flower.

She opened the door and looked back at Aksana. “You’re a terrible person. Even worse? You’re a terrible mother. Lyon is

the man he is in spite of you. And I thank god for that every day.”

She stepped into the hall and closed the door behind her.

“This situation is making me feel insane,” Lyon said quietly, staring out the passenger side window while Alek drove through the city’s darkened streets.

“Markus and I can handle it,” Alek said. “And the brigadiers.”

“I wasn’t talking about the new men,” Lyon said.

It was after midnight, the fifth night in a row they’d spent making calls to every crew standing watch over their business interests. He trusted Alek and Markus, knew they could handle the men, veterans and new recruits alike.

But it was good for the new associates to see Lyon’s face, to know that he was involved in the day-to-day business, both as a warning and a sign of appreciation for their work.

Besides, Lyon liked to look a man in the eye, shake his hand. It was the only true way to get the measure of a man. That and time, although both had failed him from time to time in the past.

Alek sighed, catching Lyon’s meaning. “We’re going to figure it out.”

“It’s been a week,” Lyon said. “The men we have are getting nervous.”

Their business interests were still getting hit once or twice a day. Whoever was responsible was attempting to go through the men Lyon had stationed as watchdogs, beating them senseless before robbing the establishments Lyon’s men were protecting or vandalizing them just for fun.

The drivers were still under assault despite the fact that they now drove in pairs. His unseen enemy seemed to have a limitless army. That army was whittling away at Lyon’s dwindling ranks, either by beating them and taking them off the street while they recovered or by scaring the shit out of the new recruits, some of whom hadn’t lasted more than a day with the *bratva*.

“The ones who need to leave are leaving,” Alek said, pulling next to the curb across the street from a dive bar that was under their protection. Three of their men, Stefan and two new recruits, leaned against the adjacent building, their gazes watchful. “If they can’t cut it, they don’t belong with us.”

It was the truth, but it didn’t solve their very real manpower problem. Lyon needed to figure out who was behind the attacks and stop the bleeding once and for all.

It was wearing on him too. He wanted to spend time with Kira before the baby came, wanted to go shopping and help her with the nursery and make love to her with their child between them.

The impending birth of their child was an ever-present hourglass in the background of their lives. They had less than two months before the baby would be born, which meant Lyon had only a few weeks to neutralize their enemy before he’d have to make a decision about leaving for Kira’s safety.

“I’m going to call Kofi,” Lyon said, reaching for his phone.

“He’s working on it,” Alek said.

Lyon sighed and left his phone in his pocket. The cyberlab was in its infancy. Kofi was working as fast as he could to set

up backdoor access to the video recordings on the traffic cams surrounding the businesses that had been targeted.

It just wasn't fast enough.

Lyon looked at his friend. "You have an extra passport, yes?"

Surprise flickered in Alek's eyes. "Yes."

"Good. Make sure you have cash in addition to that offshore account too," Lyon said.

Alek rubbed one of his cheeks. "Something I should know?"

"Not yet," Lyon said.

Alek cocked an eyebrow. "But?"

Lyon hesitated. He trusted Alek with his life, but Lyon still hesitated to voice his backup plan.

"I have to think about Kira, about the baby," Lyon said. "I'm planning for every eventuality."

He'd already secured three different passports for them both, in three different names, from three different countries. He had more than one offshore account that could be accessed from anywhere, plus a numbered Swiss account, and he'd increased the amount of cash he kept in a safe in the penthouse just to be safe.

If he had to get Kira out, it would be in style. They could live privately and luxuriously in any number of other countries.

He stifled the pang of disappointment that punctured his chest. He'd only ever wanted to rule the bratva, to make his father — god rest his soul — proud by claiming the role that would have been his if he hadn't died in prison.

"Fuck," Alek muttered.

"Nothing's been decided," Lyon said. "And if we had a face for the enemy, if we knew who was behind it all, we could fight. But this..." Lyon looked through the windshield as Stefan lit a cigarette, the match briefly flaring before

disappearing in the dark. “I can’t protect her from something I can’t see.”

Saying it out loud chilled him to the bone. He’d failed her once.

It wouldn’t happen again.

He wouldn’t allow it.

Kira held onto Lyon's hand as they walked through Grant Park, the lights in the city's skyscrapers glowing softly against the twilight sky. People milled about on the paths, everyone enjoying the warm summer evening, the quiet chatter of conversation and laughter filling the air.

"This is the perfect end to a perfect day," she said.

Lyon kissed her head and tightened his hand around hers. "Agreed."

They'd started out with a whirlwind baby shopping spree at Bloomingdales, where they'd picked out a crib, stroller, and car seat, plus a few odds and ends.

After that, they'd visited several small boutiques, laughing and arguing over the bedding and towels, the little shoes and tiny clothing, toys the baby wouldn't use for years but that Lyon insisted on purchasing anyway, along with a million little things the baby probably didn't need at all.

Kira didn't have the heart to tell him they were buying far more than the baby needed, that they would likely need to pack some of it away in the Lake Forest attic until the baby was older. She had the sense that Lyon needed this as much as she did, that he was making up for both lost time and for their

uncertain future, and she didn't have the heart to dampen his spirits.

She'd joined in instead, cooing over the tiny socks and sleepers, knowing that very soon, their child would be wearing them.

After they'd finished their shopping spree — with instructions to deliver everything to the Lake Forest house — Lyon had taken her to a late lunch at Oriole. She had no idea how he'd gotten them in at the last minute — she'd heard the waiting list was weeks long — and she didn't care. It was easily one of the best meals she'd ever had, and she'd groaned her way through a sublime series of dishes that included steak tartar, delicate foie gras, smoky squab, and wagyu steak with freshly grated wasabi and morel mushrooms.

She'd protested against dessert, but Lyon had insisted they finish their meal right, and she'd done her share of damage to the lemon and sesame soufflé.

She sighed happily and leaned on Lyon's arm. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For this day," she said. "Taking time off is hard right now. It means a lot to me that you did."

"You deserve it," he said. "I only wish..."

She lifted her head and looked up at him. "You wish?"

"That I could have given you this your whole pregnancy," he said.

She shook her head. "I married you thinking it was a business arrangement, hoping we could come to a place of mutual respect. You've given me so much more, and every second of it has led us here."

She wanted to say she wouldn't change a thing, but it would be a lie. She would change what had happened to Lyon at the hands of Vadim's men. She would take away the suffering he'd endured, the trauma that haunted his dreams.

But this was not the time nor the place to speak of such things.

They were out for a walk after a happy day, the world vibrant and so very alive around them, children running through the park, couples holding hands, friends jostling each other playfully.

Right now, they both needed to believe there was more of this in the world than there was of what they'd endured the past year.

"You're far too agreeable," Lyon said as they came to Buckingham Fountain.

She laughed. "I bet you never thought you'd say those words."

He joined her, his laughter a distant rumble from his chest that warmed her all the way to her toes. "A year ago, I most certainly would not."

"Well, don't get complacent, husband."

He grinned down at her. "I wouldn't dream of it." He led her to a bench some ways away from the activity around the fountain. "Shall we sit?"

"Yes, please," she groaned, lowering herself to the bench.

She couldn't escape the feeling that she no longer walked, she waddled, and it was strange to feel her body ache after even a short stroll. By the end of every day, her back was sore from the weight of her stomach.

Plus, she had to pee constantly.

She exhaled her relief and sat back on the bench, looking at the fountain around which everyone seemed to gather.

Inspired by Versailles, it was constructed out of pink Georgian marble and was highlighted with red and purple lights that glowed enchantingly in the encroaching darkness. Four sets of bronze seahorses emerged out of the water in the fountain, lit gold as if by the moon.

She looked up at Lyon, his strong jaw and chiseled cheekbones even more beautiful in the evening light. He was looking at the fountain, but his expression was faraway.

“What’s on your mind?” she asked.

He looked down at her. “You first.”

She couldn’t hide her surprise. She’d been waiting for the right time to tell him about her visit to see his mother. She wouldn’t go into the details — that would only hurt him — but neither would she keep a secret from him.

Not ever again.

She drew in a breath, hoping she wasn’t about to ruin their perfect day. “I went to see your mother.”

She was encouraged when his expression didn’t immediately turn to one of rage. “Would you like to share your reason?”

“I feel so helpless. You’re working night and day, trying to figure out who’s attacking the bratva, and I can’t do a single thing to help. I thought...” She sighed, feeling stupid. “I thought maybe she would let something slip, or maybe I would catch her in a lie that would be telling or... I don’t know. Something.” She shook her head. “It was the only thing I could think to do, but I know now it was foolish.”

He bent to give her a quick kiss. “Not foolish. Lovely of you. Visiting Aksana is never a pleasurable way to spend an afternoon. Do I want to know what she said?”

No. No, you don’t. And I’ll never, ever tell you how little regard she has for you.

“She claims she’s staying to enjoy the city. I tried to push, but she just made light of it, said it was a kind of game.”

His eyebrows knit together. “A game?”

She shrugged. “She said it was all a game and if I didn’t know that I was a fool.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you were going to pay her a visit?” he asked.

“Because I knew you’d try to talk me out of it, or that you’d want to come with me, and honestly, the only thing that felt worse than suffering through a visit with her myself was making you suffer through one. I always planned to tell you. I just wanted to wait until after it was done.”

A slow smile broke across his face. “Forgiveness rather than permission?”

She laughed. “Something like that.”

“I understand,” he said. “It was good of you to try and protect me, to try and help, but you must promise to never do it again, not without me, or at the very least Alek or Rurik.”

She nodded. “Your turn.”

“My turn what?” he asked innocently.

She slapped at his arm. “You’re not getting out of this. You have something to tell me too.”

He looked at the fountain, his expression suddenly serious, as if he were seeing something other than the crowd of people milling around the fountain and sitting at its edge. “When you agreed to marry me, it was in exchange for a voice in the bratva. You wanted to be a partner in all things.” He turned to look at her. “I don’t think it will come as a surprise to you to know that I didn’t want that at all.”

She laughed. “You made it quite obvious.”

“I was a fool,” he said. “You’ve proven over and over again that you’re an asset to the bratva. To me. You see things I don’t, and it makes me proud and grateful to have you as my partner. But to truly be partners, I have to be honest. About everything.”

Fear thrummed through her body. She sensed something very bad coming.

She squeezed his hand. “Tell me.”

“I’ve made plans for us to leave Chicago, to leave the country.” Shock dropped into her stomach like a lead weight as he continued. “I hope it won’t be necessary. I hope we’ll figure out whoever is behind the attacks on the bratva. I hope

that our baby will be born here, in the city we both love. I hope that he or she will be raised in the Lake Forest house like we planned. But...”

His voice trailed off. “But?”

He laughed a little, running a hand through his dark hair. “I find the bratva is no longer the most important thing in my life.”

She lifted a hand to his cheek. “Lyon...”

He held his hand over hers, then captured it in his. “I can’t risk something happening to you and the baby. It’s the one thing I can’t live with, the one thing I would never be able to forgive myself for. The one thing I won’t survive.” He took a deep breath. “I have passports ready, and cash. We have the offshore accounts. We would be very comfortable anywhere we decided to go. I’ve given myself three more weeks to figure out who’s behind the attacks on our business. If we haven’t done it by then, we have to run.”

She could tell he had to force the last word from his mouth, and she knew it was because there was no more distasteful word to the Lion than that one.

Run.

But he would do it. For her. For their baby.

“Three weeks,” she said.

He nodded. “That will give us a month to get settled, to prepare for the baby somewhere else.”

She thought about it, imagined her and Lyon holed up in a villa or cottage somewhere. She imagined their baby not knowing who he or she really was, not knowing they were a child of the Lion.

She imagined them having quiet dinners together, trying not to give away who they really were, where they were from, in case someone came looking for them.

They would be comfortable. But they would be hiding.

“No,” she said.

He blinked. “No?”

She took a deep breath. “No. We aren’t running.” He started to protest and she held up a hand. “It’s my turn.”

Her voice had turned to steel, an echo of the way things had been between them in the early days of their marriage, when he was a domineering brute and she had been too stubborn for her own good.

He nodded and she continued.

“If you don’t figure out who’s doing this in the next three weeks, I’ll leave — but only temporarily and not somewhere far away. You can hide me away in a small town somewhere. I’ll even consider another state.” She thought of Orcas Island. That would do. “But you will stay here and fight for what’s yours. For what’s ours. You can join me when it’s time for the baby, and then you will return and continue fighting until this new enemy — whoever he or she may be — is eliminated. And if a new enemy emerges, if a hundred new enemies emerge, we’ll do whatever must be done to keep our child safe. I acknowledge this means I would have to go as well.” She looked up at him. “But you’re the Lion. You don’t run from anything or anyone. Not even for me. And we’re not leaving behind what’s ours.”

He stared at her for a long moment, and she wondered if he would be angry. If she’d found some invisible boundary that was still between them, one which she was still not allowed to cross.

Then he dragged his knuckles down her cheek, his eyes lit with a strange amber fire. “You have to be sure.”

She lifted her chin. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

She thought she saw admiration in his eyes, but it didn’t really matter. She wasn’t making this choice to earn his admiration.

She was making it because it was right. Because it was just.

Lyon had worked his whole life to be pakhan. And there was no better leader for the bratva than him.

A smile slowly lifted the corners of his mouth. “Then we stay. We fight.”

She nodded, meeting his gaze. “We stay. We fight.” She smiled. “Although you might have told me about the plan to leave before we cleaned out the baby department at Sak’s.”

He threw back his head and laughed, then pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly against him. “I wanted you to have fun. To do something any other pregnant woman would get to do in preparing for a baby. I want you to have everything.”

She held his face in her hands and kissed him. “I already do.”

Lyon was in his office working on a list of ways to increase revenue when Alek burst in, his expression animated with excitement.

Lyon stood. “What is it?”

“Kofi has something,” Alek said.

Lyon was headed for the door before Alek could say anything else. His conversation with Kira in the park a few days earlier had been a relief — both the confession of his plans and Kira’s reaction to them — but the clock was still ticking, and he still wanted his wife to give birth in their city, to bring the baby home to the house in Lake Forest and the nursery that Kira was painstakingly preparing for their child.

The warehouse was quiet upstairs. The soldiers and brigadiers were all on the street, trying to head off more attacks by their unseen enemy, trying to reassure the associates that all was in hand, but the hum of conversation from the new cyberlab reached him as they made their way down the metal stairs that connected the mezzanine level rooms to what had once been the factory floor.

The lab had been staffed quickly, and what had once been an expanse of concrete dotted with the ghostly shapes of

abandoned factory equipment was now a hive of activity.

Several long tables were set up in rows, an array of computer equipment scattered across their surfaces. The analysts and hackers Kofi had hired to work in the lab, most of them younger than thirty, glanced up as Lyon approached.

He tried to nod and smile, though geniality wasn't his strong suit. He didn't know exactly what each of them did, but Kofi — a former analyst with Homeland Security and the NSA, with another five years doing highly illegal corporate espionage for hire — had come highly recommended by the head of Damian's lab.

Lyon had reviewed the results of the in-depth background checks they'd done on each and every candidate, ruled out the ones with higher-than-average risk for outside influence, then left the hiring to Kofi.

Lyon and Alek made their way through the rows of tables to a long one at the very back occupied by an imposing man with burnished skin and black hair, his gaze focused on two of the four computer screens in front of him.

“Kofi,” Lyon said, “what do you have for me?”

Kofi looked up, his cloudy gaze slowly clearing. Lyon had gotten used to it in the weeks Kofi had been working for him. Approaching the man while he worked was like trying to pull someone from a compelling dream. It took a minute for him to come fully back to the here and now.

“We're in,” he said.

“You're... in?” Lyon asked. “To the traffic archive?”

Cracking the cameras had taken Kofi all of two hours, but they weren't looking for the live feed. They needed access to the historical images, and those were locked behind the city's firewall with the rest of its data.

“I'm in,” Kofi said, turning to his screen. His fingers flew over the keys on the keyboard until two images appeared. “What do you see?”

Lyon adjusted his position so he had a better angle. He recognized one of the pictures. In it, a group of men — including Sergei Ivanov — stood outside a brick building, cigarettes dangling from their fingers.

It was one of the pictures Damian had given him when Lyon had been trying to figure out where Vadim and his men were working. Lyon had passed it onto Kofi.

The other picture had been taken at a different time and place. The image quality was grainier, and this one showed a group of men in an SUV. Lyon couldn't make out the guys in the back, but the two men in the front were pretty clear.

He looked closer. There was something familiar about the guy in the passenger seat, something in his narrow face and hawk-like nose.

He looked back at the first picture and the pieces clicked into place.

“It's the same guy,” Lyon said. He touched the man in the first photo — head bent to a cigarette near the entrance to the tunnels that led to the water crib — then the second photo, where he was a passenger in a car driven by someone Lyon didn't recognize.

“Yes,” Kofi said. He tapped at the keyboard and a single image filled the screen. It was a mug shot, and Lyon instantly recognized the man standing behind the numbered slate as the same man in both pictures.

“Meet Ira Lidin,” Kofi said. “He's got a rap sheet a mile long. Petty shit — vandalism, auto theft, assault.”

“Not exactly the leadership qualities we're looking for,” Alek said drily.

“He's no leader,” Lyon agreed, staring at the man's face on the screen. “Just a worker bee.”

“So one of Vadim's men is now working for whoever is attacking us,” Alek said.

“Which means some — maybe even most — of the men attacking us might be stragglers from Vadim's army,” Lyon

said.

He wasn't surprised Kofi remained silent. He'd done his job. These discussions were above his pay grade for the time being.

"Think one of them grew some balls?" Alek asked.

"Enough to motivate and inspire Vadim's men to take on the entire Chicago bratva without him?" Lyon asked. "No, I don't."

Vadim's high-level men had all been securing his position at the water crib. Lyon had known they hadn't killed every man on the street, but it hadn't mattered, because a man on the street needed someone to lead him to be dangerous, and at the water crib, Lyon had killed the only two candidates.

Which meant someone else had picked up where Vadim left off, leading his army, either because it had been pre-arranged or because he was an opportunist who saw his chance to commandeer an army that was already in place and prepared to do a job.

"Maybe Vadim had a partner?" Alek asked, on the same track as Lyon.

Lyon considered it further, then shook his head. "Something tells me Vadim Ivanov isn't the sort of man to have a partner."

His psychotic son didn't count.

Alek exhaled. "Fuck. So this doesn't help us at all."

Lyon wasn't so sure. There was something there, something they were missing. He could feel the missing piece lurking beyond the borders of puzzle, like the memory of a dream that had just slipped out of his grasp.

Now he just had to find it.

Kira sat out on the terrace, her legs stretched out in front of her on the lounge chair as she gazed out over the abyss of the lake. It was a warm summer night down in the city, but this high up, chill air blew in off the water, and she wrapped her sweater more tightly around her, trying to think of the right words to say to Lyon.

She should have been tired. It was after midnight, and she'd been up half the night, ever since Lyon had woken gasping and calling out in his sleep.

She'd rested a hand on his chest, felt his rapidly beating heart beneath her palm, told him it was okay, it was just nightmare.

Told him he was safe.

He grabbed her hand and kissed it, held it until he fell back asleep.

But he still didn't say anything.

It had to end. His outer wounds were almost healed, but he was obviously in pain.

She'd hoped waking up with him when he had nightmares might help, that instead of pretending to be asleep under the

guise of giving him the dignity she knew he valued, if she'd been there, awake and ready to talk, he might open up in the intimacy of their bed.

It hadn't worked. He allowed her to comfort him, but he didn't speak about his nightmares, and in the morning it was as if nothing had happened.

A strong breeze blew over the terrace, ruffling her hair, and she caught the scent of the lake far below. From this vantage point — the pool around the corner to her left, the rest of the patio furniture and lights behind her — it almost felt like she was floating, the water a void in the darkness.

She didn't want to talk to Lyon in the bedroom. It was too easy for him to seduce her there, to distract her with the weakness of her own body, which always wanted him, even when there was something important to talk about.

She'd chosen the terrace instead, not wanting to wake Annie and Zoya. She had a feeling Rurik knew exactly where she was, although she hadn't seen his face in hours.

He always did.

The private elevator opened from inside the apartment and she took a deep breath, trying to calm her nerves. Lyon was her husband. He was suffering. She had a right to expect him to talk to her about it.

She waited patiently, knowing he would notice the open doors to the expansive terrace, that he would see her sitting on the lounge chair and come to check on her.

Less than a minute later, she heard him approach, felt the gentle kiss he left on the top of her head.

“Hello, *malen'kiy sokol*. What are you doing still awake?” He came around to take the chair next to her, easing into it with a sigh. He'd been working too hard, leaving the house early, coming home after midnight.

She took a deep breath. “I want to talk to you.”

He looked puzzled. “It's cold out here. Why don't we talk inside?” He gave her a slow sexy smile that sparked a fire in

her belly. "I hear the bedroom is nice."

His biceps pulled at his button-down shirt, the sleeves rolled to reveal his corded forearms, and it was hard not to look at the significant bulge in his expensive trousers.

His dark hair was deliciously tousled, his eyes promising the sweet refuge of pure pleasure. She wanted nothing more than to let him lead her upstairs, to pretend this thing didn't stand between them and forget their troubles in each other's arms.

She shook her head. "Not this time, my love."

He opened his mouth as if to argue, then quickly closed it before easing back onto the lounge chair. "What is it?"

She sat up and threw her legs over the side, wanting to look at him without craning her neck. "You tell me."

"There's nothing to tell," he said curtly. "You know everything there is to know."

"Not everything," she said.

He sighed and mimicked her position, his knees bracketing hers between the chairs. He took her hands in his. "I don't want you to know everything. It would... hurt me if you knew everything."

"Why?" she asked softly.

He studied their joint hands. "I've already let you down."

She recoiled from the statement. "That's... that's not true. Why would you say that?"

"I let them take me," he said without looking into her eyes. "I wasn't there to protect you like I promised. And then..."

She sucked in a breath. She wanted to linger on the things he'd said, but he was talking. For the first time, he was talking, and she wanted him to get it all out.

"And then?"

"Then I... I wasn't strong," he said.

"How so?" she asked.

He met her gaze, and she had to force herself not to flinch at the anguish in his eyes. “I screamed, Kira. I... cried. I begged them to stop.”

She reached out to touch his face. “They hurt you. Anyone would do those things.”

He stood up so suddenly he startled her, and she watched him pace to the edge of the terrace, his gaze traveling out into the darkness. “I’m not anyone.”

She stood and joined him there. “No, you’re my husband, and I want you to talk to me. To tell me how you feel even when it’s ugly or scary. That’s what marriage — what love — is.”

He turned to look at her, his eyes flaring with something like anger. “And what if I can’t? What if I’m not capable of that kind of love?”

“I don’t believe that. It’s scary to let someone see every part of you. I understand that as much as anyone. But I don’t want a two-dimensional marriage where we both pretend everything is fine when it clearly isn’t.”

He shook his head and paced away from her clearly agitated.

“I want the real thing, Lyon. I want to know you. Every part of you.”

He turned on her suddenly, face contorted, eyes blazing. “You married the Lion,” he shouted.

She forced herself not to retreat. Lyon had been angry with her before, in the early days of their marriage when she’d pushed and pushed, enjoying the power she had over him.

But he’d always been in control.

This was different. She could feel his rage boiling beneath the surface of his skin, saw his fury in the set of his jaw and his fists at his sides.

And yet she wasn’t afraid. She knew with every ounce of certainty in her body that he would never, ever hurt her.

She walked toward him and took his face in her hands. “I may have married the Lion, but I fell in love with a man.”

His expression turned to one of agony, and she was almost tempted to tell him to forget the whole thing.

She forced herself to remain quiet. This needed to happen.

The only way out was through.

“What do you want from me?” he asked, his voice tortured.

She didn’t let go of his face. “Everything.”

“And what if I can’t give that to you? What if I’m not strong enough?”

She shook her head. “I don’t believe that. My husband is the strongest man in the world.”

Silence weighed heavy between them.

“Having nightmares doesn’t feel strong,” he finally said, his voice halting. “Waking up screaming doesn’t feel strong.”

“You survived being Vadim Ivanov’s prisoner for almost five weeks. They beat you and cut you and threatened you, and still, you told them nothing. Tell me a man alive who could have done the same.”

“But I’m... I’m not the same.” She waited, letting him find the words. “When we went to the water crib to get Vadim, I felt... *scared* in the tunnels. They made me remember all those weeks... that feeling of being buried, of being lost forever. I’m not sure I’ll ever be the same.”

She rested her hand against his chest. “You don’t have to be the same.”

“The men —”

“The men see what is in front of them.” She tilted her head to look at up at him. “You can save the Lion for them. I want this. I want my husband.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “I may not be very good at this.”

She smiled a little. “I’m not looking for perfection. I’m not looking for you to tell me every feeling you have the second you have it. I know this will take time. I just want...” He looked at her questioningly, as if he really needed the answer. “I just want you. All of you.”

“What if you can’t handle all of me?” he asked.

Her gaze didn’t waver. “I think I’ve proven that I can.”

He slid his fingers forcefully into her hair, tipping her head back, and she suddenly wondered if they were still talking only about the emotional intimacy that so scared him.

“You’ll wait for me?” he asked. “To... learn this?”

“Forever,” she said without hesitation.

He slammed his mouth down on hers.

She slid her arms around his neck and pressed her body into his as his tongue invaded her mouth. He was already hard, his erection pressing insistently against her stomach, and she immediately grew wet for him.

He pulled away and stared down at her. “Have we done enough talking?”

“For now.” She’d meant what she said: it would take time. The bratva was nothing if not a bastion of toxic masculinity. She didn’t expect Lyon to suddenly wax poetic about every feeling he had. That they’d opened the door to the kind of emotional intimacy she craved was enough for one night.

“Then can I please take my wife to bed?” he asked.

She ran her hand down his chest and stroked his cock through his pants. “You may.”

He growled, swept her into his arms, and headed inside.

He would have expected all the talk of emotions and feelings to dampen his physical passion, but it had the opposite effect. He was burning for her, their conversation opening a final door in his heart, one that had hidden his most secret fears, the ones that would make him look weak or unable to lead the bratva, that might make him look weak to his wife.

What do you want from me?

Everything.

The words echoed in his mind as he made his way through the silent house. He climbed the stairs to their bedroom, their eyes locked, her soft weight a comfort in his arms.

He turned into their bedroom and carried her to the bed, setting her gently onto the floor.

She'd told him not to treat her like something fragile, but now he had the urge to worship her slowly and carefully, not because she was pregnant, but because something had shifted between them, and he wanted to explore the new boundaries of the territory that was his love for her.

He slipped her sweater off her shoulders, then unzipped the jacket to her track suit to reveal a long-sleeve T-shirt stretched over her stomach.

He chuckled. “You’re wearing a lot of clothes, darling.”

She smiled up at him in the darkness of the room, the lights from the city casting a glow over the bed. “It was cold out there.”

“Let me warm you up,” he said.

He lifted the hem of her T-shirt and pulled it over her head, then reached around to unclip her bra, freeing her breasts, heavy and swollen and begging for his mouth and tongue.

Soon.

He bent at her feet. “Hold onto me, malen’kiy sokol.”

He slid off her pants and underwear as she held onto his shoulder for balance.

Then she was naked and glorious before him.

He stood, running his hands along her belly — their baby — as he looked down at her. “You’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

He bent his head, burying his nose in her neck and the silky hair that fell around her shoulders, breathing her in.

She sighed, letting her head fall to one side as he ran his nose up her neck, his breath giving rise to goosebumps on the surface of her skin. Her scent — the almost antiseptic tang of lavender mingled with a sensual undertone of patchouli — blotted out everything else.

She smelled like home.

She smelled like his.

He slid his hands up her arms to her neck, cradling her head while he left a trail of kisses on her jawbone. Her breath was a whisper in the room, and when he got to her mouth, he inhaled it greedily, wanting to be part of her in every way imaginable.

He left a kiss on each of the corners of her mouth, then pressed his lips to hers gently, running his lip along the seam of her mouth.

She opened for him, her mouth warm and welcoming as his tongue dipped into it, tangling with hers in a languid dance that sent an unfamiliar shiver down his spine.

He'd felt desire many times in his life — although the desire Kira had sparked in him had been like no other — but this was something deliciously unfamiliar. This was desire made more potent because the last of the barriers between them had fallen and she was still here, opening herself to him.

To all of him.

He'd told her all his secret fears, revealed parts of himself that made him ashamed, and she still loved him.

Still wanted him.

Her fingers squeezed around the hair at the back of his head, and she pressed more fully into him, molding her body to his, her soft curves meeting his hard planes, her peaks sinking into his valleys, until he didn't know where he ended and she began.

She trailed her hands down his chest, her fingers fumbling for the buttons of his shirt while their kiss grew more heated. When she finally got them undone, she slid the shirt off his shoulder and the touch of her warm skin sent a bolt of desire through his body.

She reached for the button on his pants, and he grabbed her hands in one of his. "Not yet, darling. Sit down."

She obeyed, sitting on the edge of the bed, and he knelt in front of her and parted her legs.

"Lay back, my love."

She did, and he positioned himself between her thighs, running his nose along the silken skin of her inner thigh, breathing the musky scent of her need.

Her pussy was wet and glistening for him, swollen and begging for his tongue.

He was all too happy to oblige, and he parted her thighs further, his cock pulsing at the sight her.

He ran his thumb through her slick folds and looked up and found her propped on her elbows, looking at him with glassy eyes.

“I love how wet your pretty pussy gets for me,” he murmured, lowering his mouth to her sex.

He ran his tongue through her swollen folds, then closed his mouth around her clit.

She gasped as he sucked, driving her fingers into his hair, clenching around the strands until another jolt of heat hit his cock.

“Lyon...”

He lapped at her clit, making circles with his tongue and then licking until she moaned.

“Please...” she gasped.

He slipped two of his fingers inside her, hooking them to press against her G-spot while he worked her clit.

“Oh my god...” She moved her hips with his rhythm, sinking onto his mouth and fingers when he plunged deeper, grinding her soaking pussy against his face.

He loved her like this, his ice queen raw and needy and ready to come.

His own desire was building to a fever pitch, the sound of her mounting need making him even more desperate to bury himself inside her, to feel her channel close around him as she came.

He added a third finger to her pussy and licked faster, felt her reach for her orgasm, her knees bent and coming up onto the bed so she could use her feet as leverage to work with him.

She came apart all at once, crying out into the room as she shuddered against his mouth, her pussy clamping down on his fingers.

He kept up the motion of his tongue and fingers, wanting to wrench every last tremor from her body, stopping only when she was limp and gasping on the bed.

He left kisses on her inner thighs, then stood before her and discarded his pants and underwear.

Her eyes raked lustily over his body, lingering on his cock, jutting between his legs.

She stretched out a hand. “Come fuck me, husband. I want you inside me.”

He stretched out beside her, bracing her hips as he rolled under her, making sure she was stable as she got into position straddling his hips.

His gentleness was uncharacteristic, and Kira didn't know if it was because of the baby or because of their conversation on the terrace.

Maybe both, but she didn't mind. She'd sensed the falling away of something between them, some vestige of their original arrangement that had made Lyon feel he had a role to play in their marriage other than the man she loved.

His cock was nestled in the slippery folds between her legs, bumping against her clit just enough to bring her hunger for him roaring back to life.

He grabbed onto her hips, and she lifted herself up on her knees and positioned him at her entrance, then sank slowly onto him with a sigh.

He groaned when he was finally buried inside her, and she bent over him to stroke his face with her hands while she looked into his eyes.

The silence between them felt weighted, but this time not with something unsaid. This time the silence was an embrace

of love, of trust. It was like sinking into warm water, letting it close gently over her head.

He looked up at her with naked adoration. "I love you."

She hadn't doubted that he loved her, not since the first time he'd said it, but this was the first time he'd ever said it in bed, their bodies joined.

"I love you too, Lyonya Antonov."

Tonight, she didn't want him to be the Lion. She just wanted him to be her husband.

It was more than enough.

He thrust into her, excruciatingly slow, looking at her the whole time. She gasped, taking all of him, letting him fill her.

She moved her hips to grind on him, letting the friction work her clit before he lifted her hips to move out of her. The rhythm was slow and sensual, different than their usual sexual frenzy, when they both greedily sought release.

She straightened, getting a better angle to work her own pleasure, and he sat up with her to palm her breasts before taking one of her nipples in his mouth.

They were both sitting now, their baby between them, the angle helping him to sink even deeper inside her while he sucked and licked the taut bud of her nipple.

The sensation was almost too much: the push of his cock through her channel, the friction on her clit, his arms around her waist while he lapped at her nipple. It all worked together like a strong breeze on a building fire, and she felt her orgasm build quickly at her center, seeping outward into the rest of her body.

He must have felt it because he lifted his head from her breast and gripped her hips, helping her to rock on his cock while he thrust up into her, faster now, their slow, sensual lovemaking turning more urgent now that they were both so close to release.

"You feel so good, Kira," he said, pulling her face toward his. "So warm and tight."

His tongue dove into her mouth, invading it the way his cock was invading her pussy. He was everywhere, and her pleasure built and built until it finally overflowed in a shattering orgasm that caught her by surprise in its intensity.

“I’m coming, Lyon.” She didn’t recognize the animal sound of her own voice.

He groaned long and low, spilling into her, thrusting hard and fast, holding onto her like a drowning man clinging to a life raft as he came inside her.

She collapsed, draping her arms over his shoulders, leaning her head against his chest, her hair damp with sweat.

He stroked it and kissed her head. “I’ll never have enough of you, malen’kiy sokol.”

She lifted her head. “I’ll give you everything if you’ll do the same.”

He tightened his arms around her waist, felt their child nudge up against him. “Forever?”

She looked into his eyes. “And always.”

He woke the next morning with her arm thrown across his chest, her hair fanned out around their bodies. Sunlight cast columns of golden light on the bed, which meant he'd already slept too late.

But he'd slept. For the first time since he'd been home, he'd slept without a single nightmare.

He kissed her head. He didn't want to wake her, but there was work to do. The cipher of who Vadim's men were working for was still circling the back of his head, but it had to be cracked.

And soon.

The bratva couldn't continue taking the hits it had been taking for the past couple of months.

Something had to give.

He reached over and stroked Kira's stomach. "Good morning, baby."

Her eyes fluttered open and she craned her neck to look at him. "Is that for me or the little one?"

He lifted his head to kiss her lips. "Both of you."

She trailed her fingers over his chest. “Good morning. I suppose you have to get to work.” she said wistfully.

“I do,” he said. “But first, I’d like to take my wife to breakfast.”

She sat up, the covers falling around her hips. She looked like a goddess, her breasts heavy, stomach beautifully round, her hair a sexy mess. “Really?”

He laughed. “I’m not sure anyone has ever greeted me with such excitement at the notion of breakfast, but yes. Let’s get breakfast.”

He didn’t know what the future held. If Kira ended up going into hiding to have their baby, there would be even fewer opportunities to do something normal like have breakfast after a night of great sex.

He wanted to take advantage of every moment to be with her.

They dressed quickly — although he was sorely tempted to take Kira back to bed — and went downstairs. Annie and Zoya were already bickering in the kitchen, so they said a hurried goodbye and made a quick exit before they could get sucked in.

They were pulling on their shoes near the elevator when Lyon’s gaze fell on the vase of flowers on the console. “Who’s sending my wife flowers?”

Kira sighed. “They’re from Ivan.”

Lyon stilled, the puzzle in his mind shifting. “Ivan?”

“He sent them after the baby shower,” Kira said. “I meant to throw them out. I’ve just been so busy at the house, and I forgot to mention it to Zoya.”

He combed through the pieces in his mind. “What was it my mother said when you visited her? About a game?”

“She said if we want a game, she would play it,” Kira said.

Lyon looked at her. “Can you remember her exact words?”

Kira bit her lower lip. “It was strange actually. She said *give me a difficult positional game, and I will play it.*”

He pulled her into his arms. “My god, you’re brilliant.”

Now, he understood.

Lyon stood in the middle of the woods, his eyes on the machine sitting on the ground. It looked like a futuristic bug, which now that he thought about it, wasn't far off from the truth.

“And you're sure this thing can make it all the way to the house?” he asked Kofi.

“I'm sure,” Kofi said, tapping some buttons on the controller. “It's a long-range drone. I've used it before.”

Lyon nodded. “Let's do it.”

Kofi stepped back, and Lyon and Alek followed suit. Markus was already back a few feet. He'd been looking at the drone suspiciously since Kofi had unpacked it, as if it might come alive and attack him.

Kofi worked the drone, and it lifted into the air with a buzz.

“They won't be able to hear it?” Alek asked.

“We'll be too high,” Kofi said, his dark eyes focused on the controller.

Lyon stood closer to him, looking over his shoulder at the screen on the controller. The view almost didn't look real, the

tops of the trees growing increasingly distant as the drone climbed.

“Okay,” Kofi said, “we’re in the air. Let’s find our coordinates.”

He’d punched the coordinates of the drone’s destination into the controller back at the warehouse, and Lyon watched with fascination as the drone left the trees and swept past a rolling lawn.

Lyon had used drones before, but this one was much more advanced, and he watched as a giant house came into view.

Ivan’s house.

Looking back, Lyon should have known. It had been Ivan who had pushed Musa Shapiev forward, using him to try and clear the board of Lyon. It had been Lyon’s mistake in assuming he’d given up after Musa’s death, that Ivan had accepted his fate as a member of the Spies, well-compensated but with no significant power.

Lyon had been wrong.

He didn’t know whether Vadim had enlisted Ivan or Ivan had used Vadim the way he’d used Musa, but as soon as Kira had repeated his mother’s words, Lyon had known.

Give me a difficult positional game, and I will play it.

It was a quote from Johannes Hein Donner, a Dutch chess grandmaster, and there was nothing Ivan liked better than a chess quote as it applied to life.

The flowers had just been an additional fuck you to Lyon, a checkmate he’d probably never intended Lyon piece together.

Kofi adjusted the controls and the picture of the house became crystal clear far below.

But not just the house.

“Fuck,” Alek said, standing behind Kofi’s other shoulder.

“He has an army,” Lyon said, looking at the men surrounding the house. “Can you give us a tour?”

“Sure thing,” Kofi said.

The view changed, the drone sweeping the grounds outward from the house, traveling along the perimeter of Ivan’s property, then over the trees immediately surrounding it.

He continued in a circle, then moved back over the house once the circle was complete.

“I count forty,” Markus said.

“Forty-two,” Alek corrected. “There are two under the pergola. You can see their legs if you look closely.”

“Alek’s right,” Lyon said. “It’s forty-two.”

“And they’re heavily armed,” Alek said. “He must have enlisted the rest of Vadim’s men.”

It would have been the easiest way to gather an army. Vadim’s high-level men had been killed at the water crib, but he’d had countless men on the street terrorizing the bratva’s business interests.

Those men would have been happy to stay and continue getting paid, and it’s not like Ivan needed big thinkers to hold a gun.

“It’s too many,” Markus said. “Most of our men aren’t ready to take on an army this size.”

Lyon studied the screen, a seed of memory coming to life as he looked at the house. “They won’t have to.”

“Why?” Markus asked.

“Because I know something Ivan doesn’t know I know.”

“This is the cutest thing!” Annie exclaimed, her cheeks pink as she held up a tiny sleeper decorated with puppies.

Kira looked over at her and smiled. “Isn’t it? Believe it or not, I think Lyon picked that out.”

Annie laughed. “That’ll be our little secret.”

Lyon was outside, securing the Lake Forest property ahead of the move to get Ivan, and Annie had insisted on keeping Kira company. Kira didn’t want to pace the penthouse while Lyon was facing off with Ivan. She wanted to be here, in the house that would be their home when it was all over, a reminder of the good that was to come.

She wouldn’t allow herself to consider any other possibility.

“I think I want one,” Annie said, tucking the sleeper into the chest of drawers Lyon and Kira had bought on their shopping spree.

“A sleeper?” Kira asked with a grin.

Annie rolled her eyes. “A baby.”

“You’d make an amazing mother,” Kira said as she arranged the bird mobile over the crib.

Annie sighed. "I have to find the right man first, I suppose."

"He's out there," Kira said. "Probably where you least expect him."

She thought of Lyon, of their wild and unexpected journey from enemies to reluctant allies to soulmates. It was the most surprising and wonderful thing that had ever happened to her.

"Yes, well, I hope he'll get his ass moving," Annie huffed. "A girl doesn't have forever."

"Am I interrupting?"

Kira turned toward Lyon's voice. Her heart stuttered at the sight of him, leaning against the doorframe, watching her with an expression that looked almost sorrowful.

She walked over to him and wrapped her arms around his waist. "Never."

"She's lying," Annie said, straightening and closing the dresser drawer. "You were definitely interrupting, but I'll allow it."

He shook his head. "Annie Kamenev, someday you're — "

"... going to make some man very happy?" Annie asked hopefully.

"I was going to say, someday you're going to present quite a challenge for some poor unsuspecting sucker," Lyon said.

She glared at him. "I'd throw something at you if I had something handy. You love me, and you know it." She flounced toward the door and Lyon eased into the room to give her space to pass. "And I love you too, which is why I'm going to leave you alone with Kira before you leave."

She stepped out into the hall and they watched from inside the room as she started down the stairs.

Kira shut the door and leaned against it, looking at Lyon.

"Don't be sad," he said, his expression softening.

“I’m not.” It was a lie, but she couldn’t help telling it even as she knew he would see it for what it was.

He grabbed her hand and pulled her against him. “I’ll be back in a few hours.”

She buried her face in his chest.

Once, she’d hated him. Now it felt like there was no place in the world safer than his arms. “I know.”

He stroked her back and she let herself pretend, just a for a minute, that he wasn’t putting himself in danger yet again. That he was just going to the warehouse to work or doing rounds with Alek.

Anything but another opportunity for someone to take him from her.

He pulled back a little and tipped her chin. “Look at me, *malen’kiy sokol.*”

She looked up at him and found his eyes warm and full of love. That there was no fear there gave her courage.

“I’ll be back,” he said, more insistently this time. “And tonight will be the end of our troubles and the start of something new.”

He lowered his mouth to hers. The kiss was full of longing and the new gentleness that had surprised her after their conversation on the terrace, but it wasn’t long before it turned heated.

She welcomed him into her mouth, their tongues sparring, his hands cradling her face like she was something rare and precious.

Tears pricked at her closed eyelids. She broke their kiss and stepped away before the tears could fall, holding his hand even though she’d intentionally put distance between them.

She knew from experience there was no easy way out of this. He just had to go.

She smiled. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine here with Annie and the small army you’ve installed around the house.”

She drew in a deep shuddering breath. “And I know you’ll be fine too.”

He lifted her hand to his lips, unfurling her fingers and leaving a kiss in the center of her palm.

Then he turned and walked away. He was almost out the door when she remembered the thing she’d forgotten to say, the most important thing of all.

“Lyon?” He turned back to look at her, and her resolve hardened. “End him.”

The tunnels weren't from Prohibition. That was a common misunderstanding among people who talked about them. Some of the bars in the city had basements with interconnecting doors, but most of them had actually been installed in the 1800s as a way to ferry coal to businesses and affluent homes.

They'd come in handy during Prohibition, but that's not why most of them had been built.

Ivan's house had been built by a well-known architect in the late 1800s. Its size and design suggested it had been built for a wealthy client, which is probably why tunnels had been installed.

Then as now, the rich didn't want to see how the sausage was made. They wanted dinner on the table, but they didn't want to see the cooks at work. They wanted a clean house but didn't want to see the staff with a feather duster.

They wanted warmth without the unsightly delivery of coal.

Lyon, Alek, and Markus approached the open metal door built flush to the ground. It hadn't been hard to find once Lyon looked up the original blueprints for the house.

Follow the tunnels, find the entrance.

“Going in,” Alek said into the microphone attached to his headset. “Stand by.”

It was after midnight, the sky dark overhead, stars shimmering in a moonless sky on the outskirts of the city. Somewhere deep inside the woods surrounding Ivan’s house, Lyon’s men waited.

Just in case.

If he had to use them, it meant things had gone to shit. But he was banking on another way.

“You’re sure he doesn’t know you know about this?” Markus asked as they climbed down a set of metal stairs into a dark concrete room.

“I’m not entirely sure Ivan even knows it exists,” Lyon said.

They moved into the room, and Lyon reached up to turn on the light attached to his helmet. He had no idea if the tunnels were structurally sound, or even if they were still passable. The helmets were a precaution, and a plan B was in place if they couldn’t access the house through the tunnels.

But that plan — attacking the house from the front with the men they had, hoping the element of surprise would be enough to get them through the door — would be noisy and dangerous.

They wouldn’t need it. The tunnels would get them there. Lyon felt it in his bones.

“There you are,” Alek said, spotting the tunnel entrance on the far side of the room.

They stepped into it without speaking.

The tunnel was smaller than Lyon would have hoped, the ceiling barely high enough to give Lyon’s head clearance, the sides near enough that he wouldn’t have been able to spread his arms.

“What the fuck is that?” Markus said, pointing the flashlight at the rotted wooden slats covered with dirt under their feet.

“Tracks,” Lyon said. “For the coal carts.”

“How did you find out about this place?” Markus said.

“Jesus,” Alek muttered, clearly annoyed with Markus’s questions.

“Sorry,” Markus said. “This place is creepy as fuck.”

Lyon didn’t disagree. The close quarters were bad enough, but the familiar smell — of dirt and concrete and things buried in the dirt beyond the tunnel walls — caused sweat to break out on his hairline.

The clatter of the metal cart.

Blood.

The bite of a knife.

Screaming. His.

His shoulder suddenly ached, the one that had been dislocated when he’d been Vadim’s prisoner, and his skin was hot under the Kevlar and other tactical gear they were all wearing.

“It’s okay,” Lyon said, forcing his voice steady. Maybe talking would distract him enough to get his body under control. “Contrary to my reputation, I was a curious child. My father used to bring me to Ivan’s quite often, and Ivan once mentioned that it had been built by a famous architect. I looked it up, just for fun, and found the original blueprints of the house.”

“And you never mentioned it to Ivan?” Markus asked.

Lyon focused on the light illuminating a few feet in front of him, on the sound of his own voice echoing through the tunnel. “I didn’t want to seem strange, and I assumed Ivan already knew.”

“Odds of being greeted by AK fire when we exit this tunnel?” Alek asked.

Lyon thought about it. “Fifty-fifty.”

The safety on Alek’s gun clicked off in the darkness.

A faint breeze blew across Lyon's face, the smell in the tunnel shifting.

"I think we're almost there," Lyon said quietly.

They slowed their steps on instinct, wanting to be prepared for whatever was ahead.

The opening appeared suddenly in front of them, the tunnel widening into another room, almost identical to the one where they'd started.

It was empty.

"Home team one, Ivan zero," Alek said.

Lyon used his flashlight to scan the room, a 30 x 30-foot box with low ceilings, some old rusted metal bins with wheels piled against one wall, and another set of metal stairs, this one leading upward.

"Bingo," Markus said, his eyes shining in the dark.

"We have to be ready," Lyon said, taking off the helmet. Alek and Markus followed suit. "Even if we're careful, those stairs are going to make noise."

He held the light on the metal door at the top of the stairs, focusing on the lock.

"Blow it off and take what comes?" Alek said, his voice hushed.

"It's not ideal, but if someone's on the other side of it, they might hear us try to work the lock. I like the element of surprise better," Lyon said.

"Our silencers will muffle some of the noise," Markus said.

"That's optimistic," Alek said. "That metal door is bad luck."

"So the door makes noise," Markus said. "It still won't be as much noise as it would be without the silencers. And there are three of us. We can take whoever is on the other side."

“Except we don’t know who’s on the other side,” Alek said.

They only had the drone footage, and that was all exterior, but Lyon had an advantage: Ivan was bratva, and Lyon knew how the bratva worked, knew what they considered when they made plans to secure a place.

Unless Ivan had deviated significantly, the majority of the security would be outside. It was always smarter to prevent someone from reaching a target than to try and deal with them once they had the target in sight.

“Markus is right,” Lyon said. “I’m betting we can take them. I’m not saying it won’t be messy, but I don’t think Ivan has a large number of guards inside the house, and our silencers will keep the men outside from hearing when we take them.”

“Your call,” Alek said.

Lyon started for the stairs. “Quiet and fast. I’ll take the door.”

They moved into position behind him and Lyon held up his fingers so they could see the countdown.

3... 2... 1.

Lyon moved up the stairs carefully but quickly, aimed his weapon at the lock, and fired.

The lock broke apart in a clang of metal, then hit the floor and fell down the stairs, making noise every step of the way.

Lyon didn’t have time to worry about it.

He briefly considered kicking in the door, then decided to open it in case they’d gotten lucky and no one had heard.

But when he opened the door, it was to two men hurrying around a corner at the end of a long hall, both of them in the process of drawing mean-looking Makarov semiautomatics.

One of them shouted in Russian.

Lyon lifted his weapon and fired. The man fell to the floor, and the one next to him quickly followed, thanks to Alek.

They waited, and Lyon silently prayed the man who'd spoken had been talking to his now-dead partner and not into a headset.

The hall remained empty.

Lyon advanced into the house with Alek and Markus on his heels. He watched with approval as Markus shoved the bodies down the stairs leading to the tunnel and closed the door behind him.

No reason to announce their arrival.

The house was quiet except for the soft tick of the antique grandfather clock that sat at one end of the hall.

Lyon pointed to the grand staircase and led the way.

He knew the house well, not only from the times he'd visited as a child but because of all the hours he'd spent here with Ivan after his father had been sent to prison. Ivan had been his surrogate father, helping him to perfect his chess game, discussing the business of the *bratva*, helping Lyon to formulate a strategy for taking it over.

He knew exactly where Ivan would be this time of night.

The second-floor landing split off in two directions. Several bedrooms were located to the right. Lyon had spent the night more than once when he'd had too much to drink.

To the left lay Ivan's large library and study.

He went left with Markus and Alek on his heels, but when they turned the corner, Lyon was surprised to see two guards standing in front of the door to Ivan's study.

They spotted Lyon, Alek, and Markus at the same time, and the moment seemed to slow as everyone reached for their guns.

But the guards were at a disadvantage: their weapons hadn't been at the ready.

Lyon shot one of them in the chest three times and heard him fall. The other one fell at the same time, blood pouring

from his neck, although Lyon didn't know if it had been Markus or Alek who got him.

They advanced on the door to Ivan's study, Alexander Glazunov's ballet *The Seasons* playing softly from behind the closed door.

Lyon looked at Alek. "Watch the door."

Alek shook his head. "You're not going in there alone."

Lyon put a hand on his friend's shoulder and looked him in the eye. "Watch the door."

He raised his weapon, put his hand on the knob, and opened the door.

He wasn't surprised to find Ivan sitting behind the carved walnut desk at one end of the room, a glass of vodka in front of him. He wasn't even surprised to find that his old friend didn't have a weapon.

Not one Lyon could see anyway.

Ivan was a thinker, not a fighter. It was why he'd enlisted others to do the fighting for him, making optimal use of his best tool — his mind — while everyone else spilled blood.

Lyon shoved the door closed behind him and entered the room.

Ivan studied him, and Lyon wondered if he was imagining the pride he thought he saw in Ivan's eyes.

"I suppose this is where you say checkmate," Ivan said.

Lyon stopped in front of his desk, his weapon pointed at Ivan's chest. "Perhaps I'll just send you flowers."

Ivan laughed. "You were always far wittier than you were given credit for."

"And you were clearly far more traitorous," Lyon said.

Ivan waved away the accusation. “That word implies there are sides to be betrayed. There aren’t. There isn’t your side or my side. There’s only the bratva and who is best equipped to run it.”

“If you thought you would make such a good leader, why didn’t you put yourself forward?” Lyon asked. “At least then you would have come by it honestly.”

“A member of the council appointed pakhan where there were others in line? Men who had been on the street? Who had enforced our rule with blood and violence when blood and violence is our currency?” The disdain in Ivan’s voice made it clear what he thought of the idea.

“So you used me,” Lyon said, unable to keep the bitterness from his voice. “You let me be knight to your king, clearing the board so you could take the game.”

“I knew there was more than one aspirant to the throne,” Ivan said. “I couldn’t compete with you on the street. It would have been... unseemly.”

“And betraying me isn’t?”

Ivan shook his head sadly. “It was a necessary sacrifice. I’m actually quite fond of you.”

“Why not seize control after I killed Musa?” Lyon asked. He didn’t want the consolation prize of Ivan’s supposed affection.

“You were still strong,” Ivan said. “I wouldn’t have gotten buy-in from the council. I had to break you. And I needed you to break the bratva, temporarily anyway.”

“So you hired Vadim.”

“Hired isn’t entirely accurate. We were partners of a sort,” Ivan said.

“I take it he didn’t know that he was also a necessary sacrifice?”

“*Pawns are the soul of the game,*” Ivan said, quoting Danican-Philidor

“Easy to say when you’re not a pawn,” Lyon said. “You figured Vadim would kill me and weaken the bratva enough that when you offered your help bringing it under control, the Spies would appoint you pakhan, in the interim at least. And then you’d cut Vadim in.”

He didn’t mention his mother, although Lyon had no doubt she was on the payroll too.

“Except he didn’t,” Ivan said. “Against all odds, you prevailed.”

Lyon thought of Kira, of her determination to bring him home. If not for her, he wouldn’t be alive.

“So this is the end of the line? No more pawns up your sleeve? No more moves?” Lyon asked.

“*You must also have a sense of when to stop,*” Ivan said.

“That’s it?” Lynn asked. “You’re forfeiting on Kasparov?”

Ivan shrugged, then downed the last of his vodka. “Who better?”

He rose to his feet and extended a hand across the desk.

Lyon looked at it, remembering all the times Ivan had extended his hand after a game, all the times Lyon had taken it.

“Thank you for playing,” Ivan said.

It was his standard post-game statement, whether he won or lost, and Lyon was surprised to find emotion clogging his throat.

The Seasons built to a crescendo as he raised his gun and aimed between Ivan’s eyes.

It seemed too simple, and yet, it was exactly as it should be. Ivan was at heart a simple man, a man who believed in the rules of the game. He’d always been gracious when bested by Lyon at chess. It shouldn’t have come as a surprise that he would close out their final game not in a hail of gunfire, but with his favorite music playing in the background, a glass of vodka at his side, and a handshake.

“Thank you for playing.” Lyon squeezed the trigger.
It wasn’t as difficult as he’d expected.

Two hours later, Lyon dragged Ivan by his arm to the front door of the estate, Alek at his side with a terrified man who smelled of piss and fear, his hands bound by zip ties.

The door opened, and a familiar suited man blanched in surprise.

“Excuse me.” Lyon muscled past him, still dragging Ivan, his eyes open and unseeing.

At least the hole in his head had stopped dripping blood.

Alek followed as he made his way to the antechamber leading to the ballroom, Ivan’s body dragging across the intricate carpets.

“Excuse me, Mr. Antonov!” The suited man called after him, striding to catch up. “I’m not sure they’re ready —”

Lyon had called on the way over, but he wasn’t particularly interested in whether they were ready for him. He entered the antechamber and headed for the ballroom door, bursting through it with Alek on his heels.

He was halfway to the curved table, the Spies — all but one — staring at him in shock, when four guards raced into the room with weapons drawn.

“I’m sorry,” the one who’d answered the door said. “He walked in before — ”

“That will be all,” Luka said to him.

The guard blinked in surprise, then backed out with the others while Lyon and Alek continued toward the table.

When Lyon finally reached it, he flung Ivan’s dead body toward the eight men looking at him with wide eyes. It landed with a thud in front of the council’s table.

Luka and Borya didn’t look all that surprised.

“You had a traitor in your midst,” Lyon said. “I’m sure you’ll find all the evidence you need at his place of residence.”

Alek shoved the terrified man toward them. “But just in case, Timur here has a lot to tell you.”

Lyon stepped back and affected an air of humility. “I trust our problems are at an end. I look forward to serving our organization with humility and honor.”

He didn’t wait for their reply to turn around and head for the door.

His wife was waiting.

Kira felt like her body was being ripped in two as another contraction bore down on her.

She gripped Lyon's hand, breathing through it, trying not to clench her muscles when it felt like the most natural thing in the world to contract with the pain.

Lyon smoothed her hair, damp with sweat, back from her head. "You're doing wonderfully, darling."

The contraction slowly subsided and Kira panted as she tried to catch her breath before the next one. They were coming faster now, and she had the sense that she was on a runaway train with no conductor, no breaks.

"How are you doing?" A nurse with graying hair and warm green eyes asked as she entered the room.

"I've changed my mind," Kira said, only half joking. She'd so far managed to hold off on the epidural, but she wasn't at all above changing her mind about pain relief. "I'd like to go home now."

The nurse smiled sympathetically. "I understand, believe me. I have three of my own." She looked at the readout on the monitor. "I think you're close. Let's have a look."

Kira had felt modest when they'd arrived at the hospital ten hours earlier. Now she spread her legs without a word. The janitor could have come in to mop the floors for all she cared.

She just wanted this over.

The nurse slipped on gloves, sat between Kira's legs, and felt for her cervix.

"Good news. You're fully dilated. I need you to breathe through your next contraction, okay? Don't push until we're ready."

Another contraction clamped down on her, and she fought against the urge to push, panting and holding Lyon's gaze while she fought against the urges of her body to expel the baby.

Not yet.

When the contraction ended, the doctor was there, along with two other nurses and two carts of instruments and equipment that would have terrified her if she'd been capable of feeling anything but the pain that blotted out everything else.

"Ready to have a baby, Kira?" the doctor asked cheerfully.

She looked at Lyon, holding her hand and staring down at her, his face creased with concern.

"I can't do this," she said.

He bent down until his face was only inches from hers. "You can, *malen'kiy sokol*. You can do anything."

"Don't leave me," she begged.

His gaze didn't waver. "Never."

"All right, Kira, on the next contraction, you're going to bear down and push while I count to ten, okay?" the green-eyed nurse asked.

Kira nodded, feeling another contraction begin to build.

The nurse glanced at the monitor as Kira's body tensed.

"Here we go: 1..."

Kira looked into Lyon's eyes and pushed.

The hospital room was hushed except for the murmur of the night nurses in the hall and the soft beeping of a monitor in one of the other rooms. The lights had been turned off, and Lyon was glad to see that Kira was finally sleeping a few feet away, her features at peace, hair mussed on the pillow behind her.

He'd seen her in all manner of dress — in designer gowns and expensive lingerie and tailored skirts and blouses — and she'd never looked more beautiful to him than she did now.

The mother of his child.

His daughter.

Katerina Baranov Antonov.

He looked down at the tiny bundle in his arms, marveling at her perfect features, her long fingers clenched into fists as she slept.

He hadn't been prepared for the outpouring of love that had flowed through him when they'd placed her in his arms for the first time. He'd known then and there that he would kill anyone who hurt her, that he would protect her with his life.

That wasn't a surprise. He was the Lion. He was well-versed in the practice of violence.

What had surprised him was the other vows he'd made to his tiny daughter, promises from his soul that came as naturally as if he'd made them a thousand times before when he'd never said them to anyone.

I promise to love you, just as you are, whatever you become.

I promise to listen to you, even when we disagree.

I promise to be there for you.

I promise to be on your side.

I promise never to leave you.

They'd defied Russian tradition by giving the baby Kira's surname as a middle name rather than Lyonyevna. She didn't need another reminder that she was the Lion's daughter, but a reminder that she was her mother's daughter — fierce, determined, able to both lead an army and birth a family — would serve her well.

She stirred in his arms and he bent to kiss her silky skin, cupping her small head, soft with blond fuzz, with his free hand. She smelled so good. Familiar, like he'd been unknowingly waiting for her all his life.

She stilled again, and he sank back into the chair.

The last two months had been blissfully calm. Busy, but calm. Lyon had continued recruiting, and the men were being put through their paces with firearms and martial arts training. He dreamed of a *bratva* for the 21st century, one where the men were empire builders instead of street thugs, where the *bratva* would exert power not only over their little corner of the world, but over all of it as a combined power.

Like the Syndicate.

There would still be bloodshed of course. Theirs was a savage business, and there was always violence where empires were being made, but it would be controlled, carefully chosen to grow their wealth and power.

An important piece of their evolution was elevating the men, making them feel part of something bigger, even the *shestyorkas* on the street.

Ludis, the club Kira had given him as a belated wedding present after Musa burned down Samara, had become a hub of activity, his inner circle enjoying the VIP room in the back while the underlings preened under the honor of being there at all.

Lyon made a point of showing his face, of learning the names of the new men and looking them in the eyes, thanking them for their work, because when it came right down to it, that's all anyone really wanted.

To be seen.

To belong.

To be part of something bigger and more important than themselves.

Vadim's men had quickly dispersed once Alek dragged Ivan outside. He'd dumped Ivan's body unceremoniously in the courtyard and asked any man who wanted death rather than money to come forward.

None of the men had, but Lyon had paid them handsomely anyway.

There was no honor among thieves, but a little goodwill never hurt.

That was the problem with hired guns — they weren't family, made or found, and that meant you couldn't trust them to have your back.

Kira moved under the blankets on the hospital bed. He raised his eyes, meeting her gaze across the dimly lit room.

She smiled and his chest swelled like a balloon.

He rose carefully to his feet and carried the baby over to the hospital bed, laying her gently in Kira's arms and then joining her on the bed so the baby was nestled between them.

“Look what we did,” Kira said softly, kissing the baby’s head.

“She’s perfect,” Lyon said, “She gets that from you.”

Kira laughed softly.

He reached for her hand and held it over the baby’s swaddled body, then he leaned back on the pillow and turned his head to look at his wife.

“Thank you, *malen’kiy sokol*.”

She smiled and stroked his face. “You’re welcome.”

He’d started out wanting everything and had gotten it in the most unlikely of places. Not with the bratva. Not with power and money and control, but with the two people in this room.

His wife. His daughter.

Where once the future had seemed like a shadow, nipping at his heels, it now unfurled like a banner of promise.

He tightened his arm around his family.

He could hardly believe his good fortune. It felt like another chance.

It felt like the start of something new.

EPILOGUE

Roman stepped into the brownstone's foyer and drew in a breath, steeling himself for what was to come.

He didn't want to be here.

"Roman." Vera, the housekeeper, strode down the hall toward him with her arms open.

She was an imposing woman, tall and thick, with severe gray hair that was always pulled into a bun and a stern face. No one in the world gave better hugs.

"Vera." He wrapped her in an embrace and kissed her cheek. "How is Jake?"

Vera had been a fixture in the house for as long as he could remember. Her five-year-old grandson had broken his arm climbing a tree two weeks earlier.

"Ack! He's fine. Ready to climb another tree." She swatted at Roman with the dishtowel in her hand. "Like you."

"Kids," Roman said.

"Maybe you'll have some of your own one day," Vera said. "You won't be so cavalier then."

Roman barked out a laugh. "When hell freezes over."

Vera grinned, displaying one gray tooth up front. “Famous last words.”

Roman looked at the stairs. “Is he in his office?”

Vera’s nod was somber. “He’s waiting for you.”

Roman’s chest felt heavy, his dread like a lead weight, but he started for the stairs anyway. What choice did he have? He’d been summoned.

“Roman?”

Roman turned to look at Vera, her features twisted with worry.

“He’s in a mood.”

Roman nodded and continued up the stairs. When was his father, Igor Kalashnik, pakhan of the New York bratva, not in a mood?

The stairs wound to a third floor, but Roman stopped at the second. At the end of the hall, Dima and Boris, two of his father’s primary bodyguards, stood outside the double doors to his father’s office. Roman had no doubt, Konstantin would be inside, whispering in his father’s ear, feeding his worst impulses.

Same as it ever was.

Not that Roman’s father would have been a good man without Konstantin. Igor had always been a vile, hard man. It had been like having a run of barbed wire for a parent, and Roman had spent his childhood trying not to be sliced to ribbons.

But Konstantin exacerbated the problems that already existed, and Roman had learned the hard way to maneuver carefully around him whenever possible.

He nodded at the guards, straightened his suit jacket, and knocked on the wood-paneled door.

“Enter,” his father barked from inside.

Roman opened the door and stepped into the room. It was darker in here, the rich velvet curtains partially drawn against

the sunlight, several table lamps lit, as if it were midnight instead of three in the afternoon.

“Father,” he said, closing the door behind him.

His father sat on the Chesterfield sofa reading a sheaf of papers. He didn’t look up as Roman entered the room, didn’t acknowledge Roman’s presence, but Konstantin eyed him like a hawk from one of the wing chairs adjacent to the sofa.

“Kon,” Roman said with a nod.

The other man blinked blandly, like Roman was only a mild curiosity.

Roman stuffed down his rage and took a seat in the other chair. He wanted a drink, but he didn’t need the distraction. The glass in his hand, the pause to drink, the bother about where to set it down when he wasn’t holding it.

His father was the worst kind of predator, one who could turn from genial to enraged in a heartbeat, one who immediately sought an outlet for his rage. Roman tried not to be present when his father’s darker impulses hit, and when he couldn’t avoid being present, he tried at least to be prepared.

He looked down at his bloodied knuckles. His body ached from the beating he’d taken during last night’s fight — although he’d prevailed in the end — but at least that pain was of his own making.

His own choosing.

It wasn’t inflicted by the hand that should have protected him.

Fighting was one of the few times Roman felt in control: the give of another man’s flesh and bones beneath Roman’s fists, the blood spurting from another man’s nose.

Roman might be hurt, but he would not be dominated, had never lost a fight.

He used to imagine the day when his father would become old and frail, when Roman might hold a pillow over his face until he stopped breathing or beat him like he did his opponents at Basil’s.

But even as his father had grown older and frailer, that day had never come. At first, Roman didn't know if it was because his connection to his father — like any child's connection to a parent — was incorruptible or if it was because he was afraid of the wrath of Konstantin and his father's other loyalists.

Finally, he'd figured it out. Roman wanted to take that which meant most to his father, his greatest treasure.

The bratva.

“Sit,” his father said, again without looking up.

Roman did.

His father set aside the papers in his hand. “We need to talk about Valeriya.”

“What about her?” Roman asked, but he already knew the answer.

“It's time for you to marry,” his father said. “Vladimir is becoming impatient.”

“Perhaps Vladimir should marry,” Roman said.

His father's expression hardened. “Making light of a serious situation is not the mark of a good leader.”

And forcing your son to marry a woman he doesn't love is not the mark of a good father.

He forced himself to silence the words in his head.

“Or perhaps it is the mark of a leader who knows what he wants,” Roman said instead.

“And what do you want?” Konstantin asked. “Who else is waiting in line to marry the great Roman Ivanov?”

Roman clenched his fists, fighting the urge to punch the smug son of a bitch.

He wasn't short willing women, and Kon knew it. He just didn't want to marry. Didn't want to torment children, a woman, like his father had tormented Roman, his younger brother, and their mother.

He forced his voice steady. “That’s not really the point, is it?”

His father sighed, used to their infighting. “I think what Kon means to say is, who else do you have in mind?”

Roman had a flash of dark hair streaked with burgundy, a soft laugh, the smudge of a bruise on a slender wrist.

Ruby.

“No one,” Roman said. “But that doesn’t mean I want to marry Valeriya Orlov.”

“And yet, we need capital,” his father said.

There were other ways to increase the organization’s capital, but Roman had already tried that tack. His father wasn’t interested in moving the bratva into the 21st century.

He was a man of the past. A man who preferred familiarity over risk.

His father, taking Roman’s silence as agreement, picked up his sheaf of papers. “I’ll arrange a meeting with Vladimir and Valeriya to go over the details.”

“And if I refuse?” The words were out of Roman’s mouth before he could stop them.

His father looked up from the papers, his eyes turned to shiny pieces of flint. “That would be unwise.”

Roman held his gaze, then nodded and headed for the door.

Now wasn’t the time to argue, but Lyon Antonov was finally in control of the Chicago territory.

And he owed Roman quite a lot of favors.

Thanks so much for reading Kira and Lyon’s story. The Empire saga continues with RAVAGE, book one of a brand new series starring Roman Kalashnik. Click now and find out what happens when a broken mafia king determined to love no one falls hard for a principled single mom whose father was killed during a mob hit.

[Click here to read Ravage](#)

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Syndicate Sinners Facebook Reader Group

Dear Reader,

Lyonya Antonov's *Savage Empire* has dominated my life for the past year. It started out as a planned three-book series, but as I approached the end of *Claim*, I just didn't feel done. I felt like Lyon — and his relationship with Kira — had one more enemy to vanquish.

It was fun for me to bring Lyon full circle with his mentor and betrayer, Ivan, but for a man like Lyon, vulnerability felt like the ultimate enemy. Watching (I say watching intentionally, because for me, writing is always a bit like channeling a story that already exists in the ether — it tells me what it wants) him and Kira navigate that test in their relationship was moving for me precisely because it's something we all struggle with. Let's face it, it's hard to be vulnerable, to open ourselves to other human beings by showing them the parts of us that feel shameful or unacceptable.

The backdrop of the *bratva* and all these strong, violent men was a perfect vehicle for Lyon to struggle with both his emotional intimacy and vulnerability issues, and that felt important. After all, what good is a strong, sexy man if we can't connect with them on a meaningful level?

I mean, he's obviously still good for SOMETHING (cue all those sexy times), but we want to connect with the men we love in a way no one else does, right?

This theme was a key factor in my decision to use so many tunnels in the book. The Chicago freight tunnels are real, as are the water cribs and the coal tunnels, and I loved tunnels as a metaphor for the things we keep hidden — from others and ourselves.

Closing out the book with Lyon holding his baby daughter and vowing not only to physically protect her, but to provide for her emotional needs felt like the perfect way to send Lyon and Kira off into the sunset for their HEA, proof that Lyon was more than just a sexy meathead — that he was a three-dimensional man capable of change and growth.

This couple ended up being one of my all-time favorites. They started out planning to use each other for power and ended up realizing there are more important things. They found true love in the most unlikely (for them) of places and they fought and sacrificed for that love.

Those spicy scenes were just a cherry on top!

Every book takes a village to bring to readers, but mine are lucky enough to be shepherded and supported by the best group of readers in the world. The Michelle St. James Syndicate Sinners is my favorite place on the internet and one of the only places I spend time when I'm on deadline. The readers there are warm, welcoming, and dirty as hell!

They also contribute to my books in fun ways when I pose dilemmas I may be having while writing. In this case, credit goes to Andrea Hoefsmit-Gugliotta for suggesting the freight tunnels as a place for Vadim to hold Lyon prisoner, and Linda Duca and Dawn Stewart get credit for naming Chuckles and Psycho, the two guards who tortured him.

I usually post some of my inspiration and research material in the Sinners group after a book is released, so please visit and look for the pictures of Kira's dress and shoes from her hot NYC date night with Lyon, plus links to read about Chicago's freight tunnels, water cribs, and the common misconception that a series of prohibition tunnels run under the city.

Come for the research material and stay for the disgustingly dirty memes posted by legendary member, Bobbi Jo!

Big thanks to Kait Aldorando and the Sinner-who-chooses-to-remain-nameless for their work editing and proofreading this book, to Rebekah Zink for the cover, and to Marti Jentis for her work with the ARC team and moderation of the Sinners group.

But the most important thanks of all goes to you. I've been lucky enough to spend the last 15 years doing what I love for a living, first in traditional publishing and then on the indie side, and I never lose sight of what a privilege that is. It's all because of you, and I never forget it. Thank you for supporting me through 45 books (!), for talking to your friends about the

St. James Syndicate world (all but three of those books are part of it), and for continuing to preorder my books (preorders make a huge difference for authors).

I hope to see you in the Sinners Facebook group!

Xo,

Michelle St. James

ALSO BY MICHELLE ST. JAMES

Suggested Reading Order

AVAILABLE ON ALL PLATFORMS

Mafia Boss Saga:

[Ruthless \(Ruthless King #1\)](#)

[Fearless \(Ruthless King #2\)](#)

[Lawless \(Ruthless King #3\)](#)

[Savage \(Savage King #1\)](#)

[Primal \(Savage King #2\)](#)

[Eternal \(Savage King #3\)](#)

[Covenant \(Vengeful King #1\)](#)

[Revenant \(Vengeful King #2\)](#)

[Rule \(Vengeful King #3\)](#)

Syndicate Saga (with appearances by your favorite Mafia Boss characters):

[Fire with Fire \(NY Syndicate #1\)](#)

[Into the Fire \(NY Syndicate #2\)](#)

[Through the Fire \(NY Syndicate #3\)](#)

[King of Sin \(Las Vegas Syndicate #1\)](#)

[Wages of Sin \(Las Vegas Syndicate #2\)](#)

[Surrender to Sin \(Las Vegas Syndicate #3\)](#)

[Thicker Than Water \(Boston Syndicate #1\)](#)

[Blood in the Water \(Boston Syndicate #2\)](#)

[Hell or High Water \(Boston Syndicate #3\)](#)

Murphy's Law Saga (with appearances from your favorite Mafia Boss and Syndicate characters):

[Murphy's Law \(Murphy's Law #1\)](#)

[Murphy's Wrath \(Murphy's Law #2\)](#)

[Murphy's Love \(Murphy's Law #3\)](#)

[Wicked Game \(Wicked Game #1\)](#)

[Fair Game \(Wicked Game #2\)](#)

[End Game \(Wicked Game #3\)](#)

[Second Chance \(Second Chance #1\)](#)

[Fighting Chance \(Second Chance #2\)](#)

[Last Chance \(Second Chance #3\)](#)

[Coming Home \(Coming Home #1\)](#)

[Home Turf \(Coming Home #2\)](#)

[Home Free \(Coming Home #3\)](#)

Imperium:

[Love or Money \(Imperium #1\)](#)

[Devil You Know \(Imperium #2\)](#)

Savage Empire:

[Conquer \(Savage Empire #1\)](#)

[Captivate \(Savage Empire #2\)](#)

[Claim \(Savage Empire #3\)](#)

[Crown \(Savage Empire #4\)](#)

Ruthless Empire:

Ravage (Ruthless Empire #1)

Syndicate Standalones:

[Muscle \(Luca's story - newsletter exclusive\)](#)

[Eternal Love \(Mafia Boss Christmas Reunion - newsletter exclusive Novella\)](#)

[Sentinel \(Leo's story\)](#)

King of Corruption Standalone Series (Braden Kane, Locke Montgomery):

[Rogue Love \(Braden Kane and Nora Murphy - newsletter exclusive\)](#)

[Rebel Love \(Locke Montgomery\)](#)

The Awakening Series (Dark Romance, mid-life heroine):

[The Awakening of Nina Fontaine](#)

[The Surrender of Nina Fontaine](#)

[The Liberation of Nina Fontaine](#)