

A RUSSIAN MAFIA ROMANCE



Mafia
SAINT

VOLKOV BRATVA BOOK TWO

ROSA MILANO

MAFIA SAINT

**A RUSSIAN MAFIA
ROMANCE**

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MILA

The back door of the van swings open and light shines in, momentarily blinding me. The sun is up. Has he been driving all night?

“Get out,” Terry says, waving the gun at me. He looks tired, like he hasn’t slept for days. Maybe he hasn’t. He’s got the sniffles of a man who’s done too much coke recently.

I shift along the bench until I’m able to hop down to the ground. I look around me. Trees. A lot of trees. I’m still in the forest. Golden yellow, orange, red, all the colors of fall.

The only sound is the rustling wind. Wherever we are, it’s far from help. No point screaming. No one will hear.

“Why are you doing this?” I ask as I set my feet on the dirt.

“You belong to me.”

As if that’s an answer. I try again. “Why’d you have to kill Mrs. Aldova?”

“You don’t get to ask bullshit questions,” he replies, his mouth turning into a sneer. “You’re not in charge, princess. I am, and you’re going to do what you’re told.”

“What the hell, Terry? Where are we?”

“Over there,” he says, waving toward another van, identical to this one. Black, no windows in the back, the kind you tell your kids to stay away from.

I look down at my hands. Mrs. Aldova’s blood. She’s dead. I blink and I see it all like it’s happening right in front of me.

She's cooking, whistling tunelessly to herself. I'm sitting down, reading. The door swings open and before she can say a word, a bullet hits her in the face. Blood sprays across the room, hitting me as I scramble backwards, away from the shooter.

Is that what it was like when my mom got shot? Not by Alexsei but by my father. Humming to herself one minute, and the next, just a corpse on the floor?

"Wake up," Terry says, shoving me in the small of my back. "Get moving."

I dig my heels in. "What are you going to do to me?"

"I'm not going to do a thing," he replies. "As long as you get in the van."

The doors are open. I can see darkness inside, a gaping maw ready to swallow me whole. I know that if I get in there, I'm dead. I'm never seeing daylight again.

That thought consumes me with absolute certainty. My only chance is to resist but how? I've got a gun in the small of my back and there's nowhere to run to without getting shot.

I take a slow step toward the van, looking in the back, my stomach turning. I think I'm going to be sick. I can feel it deep inside me, a gut-churning terror of what's coming. A certainty that my life is over.

The worst part of it all is knowing that my baby dies with me. Alexsei never gets to meet the child I'm carrying, his child.

I know what he'll think when he turns up at the cabin. Terry forced me to write that note, dug up the money hidden under the floorboards, then forced me into his van. All while muttering about what a bitch I was.

Do not try to contact me. That's what I had to write.

He'll think I killed his housekeeper then escaped with the money. He thinks I've betrayed him, run like I kept trying to do back at his place.

Will he come for me? After thinking that? He'll get the divorce paperwork signed and pick someone else to carry a

Bratva heir for him.

“Into the van,” Terry says. “I’m getting tired of asking.”

“Where am I going?”

“For a little ride. Don’t worry, at the end of it you get to have some fun with me. Won’t that be nice?”

I spin around. “What are you talking about?”

“I’ve been promised you, my sweet tight assed little darling. I get to fuck you every which way I can. Front and back. Over and over. You’ll love it because I know you’re a slut at heart. Like all women. Now get in there or I’ll shoot you in the knees. See how far you can run then.”

“This isn’t you, Terry. Come on. You’re not this big an asshole.”

“Times change, honey. You had your chance to sweet talk me but you decided to act all prim and proper, letting that Bratva prick fuck you. Whining at me that you weren’t ready but as soon as Russian cock comes along, you open your legs and sing for your supper. It isn’t fair. What’s wrong with me?”

“We going to start this game again?”

“Nope. You’re going to get in the van. We’re going to go on a little trip. At the end of it, I’m going to fuck you while you scream. Should have said yes when you had the chance. Not acted all prim and proper and cobweb pussied.”

“I’m not getting in the van.”

He points the gun down at my legs. “Last chance or I cripple you.” In the same instant, there’s a shot in the distance, a crack like a car backfiring. It echoes through the trees.

“What the fuck was that?” Terry asks, forgetting me for a moment. He runs over to the driver’s side, leaning into the seat, saying something to the man who’s out of sight there, steering wheel in his hands.

Terry steps back a moment later, his free hand covered in blood. “Someone shot him,” he says, glancing at me before staring into the trees, squinting as he does so.

He waves the gun around, letting off one shot after another into the forest. "Come on out, you prick," he yells. "Fight me like a man, you Russian bastard."

Another crack, this time closer. As the sound fades, I look at Terry. He's holding a hand up to his neck. Blood is spurting through his fingers. The color's gone from his cheeks.

He opens his mouth to say something but nothing comes out. Lifting the gun takes all the effort in the world. He grunts as he points it my way.

Before I can react he squeezes the trigger but nothing happens. He's got no bullets left.

He falls to his knees, blood soaking his front. He looks up at me, blinking slowly. Then he keels onto his side and falls still, the blood forming a thick puddle underneath him.

I spin around and look into the trees. Am I next? Is this how I die?

A figure emerges into the open, a sniper rifle in his hand.

"Alexsei?" I say as my husband marches up to me. "Is that really you?"

ALEXSEI

Before I can answer, she slaps me. “Terry could have shot me,” she says, cheeks flushing with color. “He pulled the trigger. He could have shot me.”

“You’re welcome,” I reply. “Your asshole ex is dead. You’re safe.”

“Why’d you let him pull the trigger. What if he’d shot me?”

“I counted how many times he fired. I knew he was empty. Why risk giving away my location when he was already dying?”

“So it’s fine that it scared the living shit out of me, right? That part doesn’t bother you?”

“You’re a big girl, you can handle it.”

“Dammit, Alexsei, why are you so infuriating?”

“Funny, I was thinking the same thing about you. Wait there.” I walk over to the van and drag the driver out, dumping him on the ground next to Terry.

I make a call to my clean up crew, telling them to get here and deal with the mess. Then I take my phone to pieces, dumping the parts on the ground and stomping on them.

“Why did you do that?” Mila asks, looking at me like I’ve gone mad.

“We need to be off grid for a while. No phones, no emails, no cards. Cash only wherever we go.”

“What? Why?”

“Because someone hired Terry to take you, and until we work out who, we need to stay out of sight.”

“Hang on, back up. How did you even find me? Did you see the note at the cabin?”

“I knew you wrote it under duress.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

“I know you, Mila. You wouldn’t shoot Mrs. Aldova and steal my money. It’s not your style.”

“You don’t know me that well.”

“I know you well enough. Found you, didn’t I?”

“How did you do that?”

“Got a guy who can track phones. He got hold of Terry’s. Within a couple of miles of the cabin, moving west. All I had to do was get ahead of him and then I saw this van waiting. Listened to the call the driver made.

“He was waiting for you. I could have interrogated him but then Terry might not have made the handover so I thought best to get you back before I work out who’s behind all this.”

“Any ideas?”

I take her hand in mine. “Let’s walk and talk. Someone might drive past, better not to be at the scene.”

“Where are we going?”

“I’ve got a car around the corner.”

“Yours?”

“Swapped it. This one’s registered to a man who doesn’t exist. We are officially off the radar now.”

We walk along the treeline, heading for the track where I hid the car out of sight. While we walk, I listen to her telling me what happened since I last saw her.

When she’s done, she asks again who I think might be behind it. “I don’t know for sure,” I reply. “The most likely options

are Diego Garcia or your father.”

“Who’s Diego Garcia?”

“Head of the Cartel we deal with.”

“Why would he want to kidnap me?”

“To force me to hand over part of my empire to him. Hold you to ransom.”

She’s silent for a moment. “You really think it might have been my father?” she asks eventually.

“I doubt it but he could be working with Diego. That’s the most likely scenario. Until I find out for sure, I’m keeping you safe.” He puts his hand on my stomach. “You’ve got something very important growing inside you.”

She smiles coldly. “So it’s not about me, it’s about you getting an heir?”

We’ve reached my car. I pull the branches away that kept it from view, glancing across at her as I work. “Believe what you want.”

“I will.”

I open her door. “Get in.”

“Giving me orders already.”

“Get used to it.”

“Look, if you hadn’t sent me off on my own to be in the middle of nowhere, none of this would have happened.”

“I know.”

“You do?”

“I fucked up but I intend to put it right. I will not let anyone hurt you ever again.” I grab the back of her neck, kissing her for as long as she can bear. I feel her knees going weak, her body sagging. I let her go. “You’re family,” I tell her. “We are bonded forever. I will protect you. You are mine. What are you?”

“I am yours.” She looks dazed, like she’s just woken up.

“Get in the car.”

She does as I say. I climb in and hit the gas, returning to the road to put the miles between me and the bodies. I glance over at her, brow furrowed, eyes half closed. “You all right?” I ask.

“Terry’s dead,” she says. “Mrs. Aldova’s dead. It’s a lot to handle in one day.”

“You’ll be all right.”

“Will I? You sound very sure.”

“I am sure. You’re my wife. You will be fine.”

“Unless I get killed. Or you get killed. Or we both do.”

“Not happening.”

She closes her eyes completely, breathing steadily, like she’s trying to keep from hyperventilating. “Relax,” I tell her. “Nothing to do but take it easy for a while.”

“Where are we going?”

“I’ve got some properties off the books. Going to head for the nearest one.”

“How long will that take?”

“Couple of days. I’ll find us a motel for the night. We can get some rest and I can use their phone to see if there’s any progress in proving it’s Diego behind this.”

“What if it is? What will you do?”

“Kill him.”

“That simple, is it?”

“He threatened your safety. He will die.”

It takes another couple of hours to reach a motel. She’s asleep when we get there. I pay in cash, carrying her through to the room with her muttering in her dreams. When we’re inside, I tuck her into the bed before going back out to the reception.

“Use your phone?” I ask.

“Sure,” the guy behind the counter says as I slip him a fifty.

I call Igor. “Where are you?” he asks. He doesn’t sound like a betrayer, but it’s hard not to be suspicious. He was the only one who knew the location of the cabin apart from me. How did Terry find it?

“Out of sight for now. What’s the word?”

“Diego’s still at the lake house. Looks like he’s waiting to hear if Mila’s been picked up.”

“I took out Terry and the driver. Got her out of there. You keep digging, see if he confirms he’s behind this.”

“Got my hand outside with the bug listening to every word in there. You going dark?”

“I’ll call you tomorrow.”

I hang up, returning to the room to find Mila not in bed. I’m about to panic when I hear the sound of the shower running. Crossing the floor, I reach for the door handle. Unlocked.

I push it open in time to find her slipping out of her clothes. I’m hard in an instant as she looks up and sees me watching her. “I thought I’d take a shower,” she says, grabbing a towel and wrapping it around her body.

I walk toward her, loosening my tie. “I’m not letting you out of my sight,” I tell her. “Only way to keep you safe.”

MILA

He slides his tie free, tossing it aside. His jacket follows, his arms bulging in the crisp white linen shirt. As he unbuttons it slowly, I feel my hand loosening on the towel wrapped around me. I want his hands on me.

I know I shouldn't. He looked utterly indifferent when he emerged from the forest, like he's spent a couple of hours staring at the trees, bored by their very existence.

Is that who he is? A man bored of killing. Not bothered in the slightest that he shot a complete stranger, a man whose name I don't even know. Not in the least bit concerned that he shot my ex-boyfriend.

Terry is dead. Maybe that's why I want Alexsei. The alpha male. Could it be that simple? Kill all his rivals and, apparently, I get wet for him. What the fuck is wrong with me?

More to the point, what's wrong with him? How can he be so unconcerned about taking peoples' lives?

Is that what will happen to me when he gets bored of me? One pop of that rifle and my brains splattered all over the dash of my car. Or bleeding out in the middle of nowhere. Alexsei moving on, forgetting me before the barrel has even cooled down.

If I give birth to his child, he has his heir. He will have no further need of me. We might be married but what does that really mean? He's a criminal, like my father. Once he's got what he wants from me, he'll discard me, probably into a shallow grave.

I should hate him. Hate his indifference, his casual disregard for the sanctity of life. What if our child displeases him? Could he kill them as easily?

I look at him as he removes his shirt. I take in the tattoos, the scars, the cold hunger in his eyes. He wants me right now but that's just lust talking. How long will that last?

A frown forms above his eyes, his brow furrowing as he walks up to me, lifting my chin with his hand. "Something is wrong," he says as I refuse to cry.

I swallow my tears. "I'm fine," I mutter.

"Do not lie to your husband. You wanted me to share. You must do the same. What troubles you?"

I stare into his eyes, watching to see what they do. "You killed two people today."

"So?"

"That's all you've got to say? You don't feel anything?"

He looks confused. "What should I feel?"

"I don't know. Guilt maybe."

"Why should I feel guilty. Would you feel guilty for stomping on a cockroach? Or watching a wasp hit a bug zapper?"

"That's not the same."

"They were causing me a problem. They were eliminated."

"That simple, huh?"

He puts an arm around my shoulder, drawing me closer to him, sliding the towel out of my grip. "You are my wife. You are carrying my child. They threatened you. They paid the price." His voice softens, his fingers stroking my cheek. "I will not allow anyone to hurt you ever again."

"That how it is from now on?" I'm trying to remain strong but my defenses are crumbling. Why does he have to sound so caring all of a sudden? I was so sure he didn't give a shit about anything. "Or are you just protecting your asset?"

His eyes flash fire. “You are not hearing me. You are my wife. You are mine. I protect what is mine.”

“I’m not your possession.”

He spins me around, bending me over the sink, his hand smacking down on my ass an instant later. The sting of the slap makes me shriek. I go to stand but he shoves me back down, spanking me a second time.

“Does it feel like you are not mine?” he asks, his thick hand sliding between my buttocks. He moves slowly between my legs, teasing wetness from me, sliding into me, impaling me on his enormous digit. “Or are you angry because you wish you didn’t feel like this?”

His voice softens again. “You are mine whether you like it or not. The vows are sacred. They are for life. You are bonded to me. You will obey me. In return, you will be rewarded with orgasms stronger than any you’ve ever felt before.”

He moves his hand to my clit, stroking it expertly as he continues to whisper. “Let go of your anger. You are safe. You are mine. My wife. My everything. I will kill anyone who so much as looks at you funny in the street.”

“That could get messy.” I’m trying to quip but my voice is failing, my breath turning into moans. His finger slides in me again, moving deeper, his other hand stroking where he spanked me, sending the nerve endings wild with need.

“I am in charge,” he says, alternating between thrusts and teasing my clit, bringing me ever closer to the edge. “The sooner you get used to that fact, the easier it will be for you.”

“You’re not the boss of me.”

“Keep telling yourself lies if they comfort you but the truth is unchanging. You are mine. Now on your knees.”

I can’t help but obey and I hate him for that. I sink to my knees as he removes his pants. I can’t help but stare at his enormous cock as he grabs hold of it, bringing it toward my mouth. “I am the boss of you,” he says. “I am your husband. Open your mouth.”

He grabs my cheek with his free hand, squeezing hard. “Do not ignore me.”

“Please,” I say, not liking how turned on I’m getting by his voice. “I need to shower.”

“You can shower after. Open your mouth. Don’t pretend to be prim and proper. I know you. I see you. I see that you want this as much as me. You fight yourself. Give in and open your fucking mouth now.”

I can’t resist him any longer. My pussy throbs with need as his cock slides between my lips, the ridges and bumps gliding over my tongue until he reaches the back of my throat.

“You look good like that,” he says, stroking my hair gently. “Good at sucking cock, I bet. Show me.”

I want to tell him I’ve never done it before but I can’t talk with my mouth full. I try to remember the porn I’ve watched in my time.

I run my tongue over his length, taking hold of the base, sucking him in deep, shifting my head back and forth. I’m rewarded by his expression changing.

He nods approval. “Good girl,” he says and if I had a tail, it would wag. I want his approval, despite everything.

He thrusts forward, grabbing my head, holding me in place. “You are mine,” he says. “And I’m going to mark you as mine. Do not move.”

He thrusts faster, staring at me as his cock begins to twitch. “Tongue out,” he says, pulling free from me, jerking his cock so fast it looks painful.

I obey, sticking out my tongue as he grunts above me. I stare into his eyes as he scrunches up his face and then it happens. From the tip of him, he spurts directly onto my face.

It’s warmer than I expected, making my face shift at the sensation. He sprays onto my tongue, more hitting my cheeks as he pushes himself into my mouth again.

“Every last drop,” he says as I grip the base again, squeezing the last from him. As he pulls free, I swallow the salty liquid,

still staring up at him.

“Good girl,” he says, taking my hands, lifting me to my feet. “Marked as mine. Now you may shower. I need to make some more calls.”

He turns, grabbing his clothes, walking out of the bathroom without another word. Proving my point. Once he’s done with me, he simply walks away, no longer caring, his voice as cold as it ever was.

I stand there with his seed dripping from my cheeks, my throat sore, my clit throbbing so much, it hurts. I want him in me and I’m left alone.

I climb into the shower and wash the evidence of what just happened from my face. If only I could wash my feelings away as easily.

ALEXSEI

“You’re sure?”

I wait while Igor takes a breath. “I’m sure,” he replies. “Unless you can think of another way?”

“Leave it with me.” My suspicions are confirmed.

I hang up the phone and nod to the receptionist. He looks at me like he’s expecting another fifty. I stare at him until he crumbles, finding something important below the counter that needs cleaning.

I return to the motel bedroom, finding Mila drying her hair on the bed, towel wrapped around her.

What I want to do is fuck her. I don’t have to think while I’m fucking her. But that won’t resolve this situation, only put it off.

“The sooner this is dealt with, the better,” I say, taking the hair dryer and switching it off. “I need to discuss something with you.”

“That was pretty Fifty Fucking Shades of Gray,” she replies, reaching out for the hair dryer.

“Listen to me. I need to trust you. Can I trust you?”

“Of course you can.”

She makes it sound so obvious but it’s not. “My father told me never to trust anyone.”

“With respect, that was a bullshit thing to say.”

“I know who’s behind all this and I need your help to resolve it.”

“Why me?”

“I’ll explain that in a minute.” I take a deep breath. I don’t like these emotions racing through me. Not only am I going to have to trust her, I’m also exposing her to serious risk of harm.

If any of the steps of this process go wrong, she could die. I could lose her like I lost my family. All because of me.

“Diego Garcia is a cautious man,” I tell her. “He will not let me near him without multiple guards around, but you.” I point at her. “You could get close enough to do what needs doing.”

“You’re not going to ask me to kill him, are you? I couldn’t do that.”

“You don’t need to kill anyone. What you need is to get close enough to him to make him confess. Make him admit he wants my empire and that’s why he had you kidnapped.”

“That’s all? You look worried.”

I could kick myself. I thought I was hiding my emotions better than that. I fix my face so it gives nothing away. “You make him trust you enough that you can bring him to me. I’ll do the rest.”

“That simple, is it?”

“Marriage is about trust. This will be your chance to prove yourself worthy of my trust. Do this and our marriage will remain solid for the rest of time. You will have your art gallery. You will paint. We will raise our child together. No one will ever threaten us again, not after what I’ve got planned.”

“Is that killing this Diego person?”

“You sound disgusted.”

“No, I’m getting used to the type of person you are. You force yourself on me. You kill whoever you want. You give me orders and act like the big tough boss and I get no say in anything for the rest of my life.

“I become a Bratva princess instead of a mafia one but I still get shackled in my gilded fucking cage forever. I don’t want that, Alexsei. I don’t want to be your slave.”

“When did I ask you to be my slave?”

“It’s in everything you say to me. I must obey. I am yours. You own me. You ever think about how that makes me feel?”

“Protected is my guess.”

“You guess wrong.”

“I see the truth in your eyes. You feel good being married to me.”

“Now who’s lying.” She rolls her eyes. “God, I must be a fucking idiot. Tell me something. If I do this, are your problems solved?”

“Yours too.”

“Then I have conditions.”

“Name them.”

“I get freedom after this. If I want to go shopping or on a vacation somewhere, you don’t get to stop me.”

“As long as it’s safe and you take some guards with you, I have no problem with that.”

“Alone.”

“No. Too risky.”

“I’m not spending the rest of my life with your goons breathing down my neck. You want Diego, you have to compromise. You ever heard that word before?”

“I heard it. I just ignore it.”

“Then good luck dealing with Diego on your own.” She shakes her head. “You don’t give a shit about me, do you? Want me to walk up to a man you’ve already said has tried to kidnap me. What is this, get him to kill me to save you the trouble? Bored of me already, are you?”

I walk over to her, grabbing her by the throat. “You are not in a position of strength in this negotiation. If I do not deal with

Diego Garcia, we both die. It is that simple. I will not let you die.

“You will bring him to me, then you can have whatever you want. Divorce, freedom, vacations in the Arctic fucking circle. Just do not think that I do all this for my own ends.”

I lean down and kiss her. “I could break your neck in an instant if you were my enemy but you are not. You are my wife. You are stronger than a fucking tiger. You are the only person who has ever dared fight me and lived to tell the tale. I like that about you but be warned. You can take it too far. Do I look bored of you?”

I loosen my grip and kiss her again. She glares up at me, her hand swinging to slap me. I could catch it but I let it strike. The sting is mild compared to the fights I’ve had in my life but the feeling behind it hurts much more.

“You’re a fucking animal,” she says. “All you know how to do is threaten people.”

“And make them come. Make them moan my name. You agree to this and I set everything up. There is a risk, you’re right. This whole thing is a gamble but so is life. You want your freedom? This is the price. Bring me Diego Garcia.”

MILA

I do my best to remain calm as the car pulls up outside the diner. I've been sitting here for twenty minutes, waiting to be collected.

My coffee sits undrunk in front of me. I've been staring out the window the whole time, knowing that this is madness.

What I should do is get up and walk out, disappear, change my name. Never look back. Let all this insanity fade into distant memory. There was a time when I told myself I was better off alone. What happened?

What about the baby?

The question keeps intruding. Even if I run, I'll still be bringing up Alexsei's child. That's if he doesn't track me down and kill me for going back on our deal.

He made it clear what my life is worth to him. Whatever he can get out of it. He doesn't give a shit about me as a person, just cares about using me to get what he wants.

Two things. An heir and his rival dead. He's using me to get both. Sure, he says I can walk away with my art gallery when this is done, live my dream. But can I trust him?

I tried trusting Terry when we first got together, when he told me he'd never rush me into sex. Look what happened there. The bruises on my neck have only just faded away. He's dead. Gone like he never existed. If only I could do the same with my memories of him.

I don't know whether to be scared or grateful. Right now all I feel is fear. If this goes wrong, and it's almost certain to, then I'm dead. Alexsei too.

And our child, no more than the size of a peppercorn right now. Maybe not even that, maybe a full stop. Long way to go to become a baby.

The door to the diner swings open and a man in a Grateful Dead hoodie casts his eyes over the room, settling on me. He gives me a nod and I get to my feet.

A strange sense of peace settles over me. After all the waiting, at least things are happening. One way or another, this whole thing is going to be over soon.

Alexsei told me to do whatever it takes to bring Diego to him. I've no idea how I'm going to do that.

The man who's collecting me says nothing, simply opens the back door of his BMW so I can climb inside.

I sit to the right so I can watch him while he drives. Any sign of this being a trap and I'm bailing, jumping out and running like I did with Terry.

I've got to do this. If I don't, I'll have Alexsei after me forever. Do I really want that?

I want to be free of him. I can't handle how he makes me feel. It's like looking directly at the sun. When I'm with him, I feel too much. It's all too intense. I don't like it. It scares me way more than this.

At least I have a level of control over what's happening now. I look out the window and I see the city out there and I think of Alexsei and our child. It couldn't work but what if it could?

That thought brings warm feelings bubbling up inside me. I pop the bubbles. Not happening. He's a violent criminal. That's all he is. Nothing else.

I have to trust him though. What choice do I have? It's possible death versus definite death. I don't like either option but here I am, turning the corner with a mute driver who might as well be a robot.

We get off the widest streets and work our way into an industrial area, trash piled up on corners, a burned out car half on the sidewalk. Another turn and the light vanishes.

We've turned into a warehouse, the door rolling shut a moment later. The warehouse is filled with wooden crates but we don't stop.

We keep driving forward toward another door that opens as we approach, rolling up to let us out onto a gravel drive that makes me think I've gone mad.

The warehouse was hiding the grounds of a futuristic looking house. All white and chrome and floor to ceiling windows, set on one level. Immaculate green lawn surrounds it.

There are bushes, neatly trimmed, trees, even a pond with fountain. Sitting beside it, wrapped up in a fur coat, is the man I'm here to see.

Alexsei showed me photos of Diego Garcia. He looks older in person, more wrinkles on his face. Gaunt, like he's lost weight recently, a lot of weight.

He's on the phone as the car comes to a halt, yelling at someone. Beside him is a low glass table with a small wooden box on top.

My door is opened and I step out in time to hear him hanging up. He sets the phone next to the box, retrieving a cigar from an ash tray behind the box. He nods my way. "Miss Belucci," he says in a Mexican accent. "Won't you take a seat?"

A lawn chair is dragged over by one of half a dozen guards wandering around. It's set in front of him and I sit down, wondering why my heart is so steady.

"Or is it Mrs. Volkov?" he continues with a smile. "Do you have a preference?"

"Mila."

He claps his hands together, sending cigar ash onto the front of his fur coat. "Mila, it is. Delighted to have you here, Mila. Cigar?"

"No, thanks."

“Straight to business then. I must say I was surprised to hear you wanted to meet up. How did you get hold of my number?”

“My family has contacts.”

“Playing your cards close to your chest, a woman after my own heart. What can I do for you, Mila?”

“I want Alexsei Volkov dead.”

He claps his hands together again. “I like you. No bullshitting. Just out with it and to hell with the consequences. Why do you want your husband dead?”

“Because he’s a violent asshole who trapped me in a marriage I don’t want by paying my father for my hand. I want my freedom. I want him dead. Can you make that happen?”

He taps the top of the box. “I have something here that will help with your problem and mine. Tell me, have you seen Breaking Bad at all.”

“Caught a bit of it.”

“A wonderful show. Far fetched in places but tremendous fun. There’s a scene in it where one of the characters goes to meet up with his old rival and takes him a bottle of choice alcohol. Only the bottle is poisoned and RIP rival.” He lifts the lid off the box and reaches inside.

“This is a bottle of Alexsei’s favorite vodka. Now, I heard a rumor that he’s been off the sauce for a few years but I happen to know that he’s never been able to resist this particular brand. Not made anymore. Polar Bear, it’s called. Not the most expensive. Tastes no different to the other piss those Russians drink if you ask me.”

He turns the bottle around in his hand. “Sealed, so he won’t suspect a thing.”

“You want me to make him drink that?”

“I do.”

“And what happens when he does?”

“Do I have to spell it out? He drinks the poisoned vodka, he dies. You are free. No husband, no ties to the Bratva. You can

walk away.”

“I’m taking a risk here. What if he works out what I’m doing?”

“What is life without risk? You want to be free of him. This is the way to do it. Best thing is the autopsy will show heart failure. You will not be blamed. Nor will I. A month later, you will win a prize in an online casino I run and five hundred thousand dollars will be deposited in your bank account.”

“What if I refuse?”

“That would be unwise. But why would you? I know you want him dead. You told me that yourself.”

“Why can’t you kill him?”

“And risk a war that would impact profits? No, gracias. This is far simpler. You will take that bottle to him and make him drink it or I will keep you and put you to work in a brothel in the middle of the desert back home. I am a patient man, a kind man, but I have my limits. Will you do this?”

I look at the bottle and then up at Diego. “I will.”

ALEXSEI

Igor is grinning at me, sipping his vodka. “You should get off the wagon. This clean living thing isn’t you.”

“You know I don’t touch the stuff.”

“You’re missing out. I hear a rumor there’s some Polar Bear out there. Could be yours.”

I fire my gun. It hits the target dead center. I set it down before turning to look at him. “Bullshit.”

“Hey, that’s what I heard.”

“The factory shut down twenty years ago. It’s all gone.”

“Couple of bottles left here and there. Sitting gathering dust in some warehouse or other. Got to surface sooner or later, like a corpse in a river.”

He drains his glass before firing his gun, hitting the target in the shoulder with one and missing entirely with the second shot.

“That’s why you shouldn’t drink before practice,” I tell him, heading out of the range and into the garden. I look at the time. “She should have got in touch by now.”

“You worried? The big bad Bratva man missing his wife so much he might cry? Is that it?”

I glare at him. “Keep that up and I’ll use you for target practice.”

“Hey, I’m just saying you never gave a shit where a woman was before.”

“This is my wife we’re talking about.”

“Who you bought to fuck over Don Belucci, not to festoon in roses and cum.”

My phone rings. I pull it out and answer. “Mila.”

“I’m on my way back.”

“Where are you?”

“In a cab. I got dropped off at the diner but I’m coming to yours.”

“What happened?”

“I’ll explain when I get there.”

The line goes dead. “Well?” Igor asks. “What did she say?”

“She sounded strange. Something’s up but I don’t know what.”

He shrugs. “Women, they have ups and downs. Better off sticking with your right hand if you ask me.”

“I didn’t. Go check the security arrangements. I want everything ready for when Diego gets here.”

“Will do.”

He walks away. I look across the lawn at the wall where the Mexicans attacked last time. It’s now covered in razor wire with cameras on poles covering every angle.

No one will get in unless I let them. Diego should be coming in the front door if the plan works like it’s meant to.

After that, I’m going to keep Mila for good. I came to that conclusion after dropping her off at the diner. It hurts to have her out of my sight.

Another new feeling. I need her near me. I need to trust her. I can’t spend my entire life trusting no one. I’ll end up dying alone, living alone, being alone.

She’s giving me a child. She deserves a lifetime of worship for that fact alone. Plus, she’s not run from me. I know what I am.

A monster.

Yet, she has hung around, put up with me, fought back despite the risk to herself. I admire her ability to stand up for herself. Hell, maybe I love her for it.



I'm preparing everything in the library when she arrives. She walks in looking guilty, like she's got something she's hiding from me.

"What happened?" I ask, pointing to the armchair, taking note of the wooden box in her hand.

She sets the box down on her lap when she sits down. "We need to talk," she says.

"Did he agree to come here?"

"Not quite but I'm sure he will."

"When?"

"Soon."

"Then you did your job. What's in the box?"

"Something for you." She opens the lid and lifts out a bottle of Polar Bear vodka.

"Where did you get that from?"

"That's what we need to talk about." She looks on the verge of tears.

I walk over and lift her to her feet, taking her hands in mine.

"Something is troubling you. What is it?"

"Nothing. I just...I don't know."

"This is the first time since we met that you have been lost for words. You are alive. You came back to me. I will never let you leave my side again."

Her face hardens but she says nothing.

I lift her chin to me. "You are mine. Say it."

“I am yours.” Her eyes look glassy, like she might be about to start crying.

I go to ask her what’s wrong when she kisses me. I forget all about the conversation, my tongue swirling circles over the tip of hers, my hand grabbing her in the small of her back, pulling her to me.

I have to have her. She’s like a drug. One kiss and I’m lost. I reach for her top, yanking it up, only breaking the embrace long enough to get it over her head. Then she’s ripping the buttons from my shirt.

The room is filled with the sound of clothes being shredded. I get her pants off her in time to find her soaking wet, her panties dark between her legs. I run my fingers over the patch, finding her folds and then her clit, teasing her through the fabric.

“Fuck me,” she says, laying on the rug at our feet, her legs wide apart. “I need you in me.”

I strip out of the last of my clothes, joining her on the rug, burying my face between her legs, tasting her sweetness, finer than any vodka in the world.

I lick her clit until she’s thrusting her hips up toward my face, cursing and praising me in turn as I tease her, keeping her from tipping over the edge.

“Come for me,” I say at last, sliding a finger into her and plunging it deep as she achieves her climax. She moans loudly, saying my name and my cock twitches in response.

Before she’s recovered, I’m moving up her body, straddling her chest, pushing myself into her mouth, stifling her cries with my cock.

I thrust back and forth, enjoying the way she stares up at me. “You are mine,” I tell her, stroking her hair. “You are my wife. You belong to me. I own you.”

She continues to stare but something flickers across her eyes. What was that?

The question fades as her tongue glides over me, bringing me too close to coming. I slip free from her mouth, letting her take deep gasping breaths as I move her onto all fours.

She presses her head down, pushing her ass up toward me so I can stare at the perfect sight of her on display for me. I move her knees apart, positioning myself behind her.

“Mine forever,” I tell her as I push my cock into her. “My perfect wife.”

MILA

Every word cuts deep. Not letting me go. Owning me. Possessing me.

We had a deal. He agreed to let me go if I did this. I could walk away. We'd work out shared custody of our child.

Why am I surprised he's forgotten already? Just said what he needed to say to get me to agree to the deal, to go and put myself in danger for him.

I want to hate him but it's hard when he's thrusting into me and my orgasm is still fading. He's so good at sex, it's like living in a dream. He knows exactly what to do and when to do it. It's better than a dream, in fact. I could never have dreamed it would be this good.

He holds onto my hips, driving deep into me, filling me completely, making a second climax almost inevitable.

I reach under myself, stroking my clit as he thrusts faster. "Give it to me," I tell him. "Come in me."

I want to believe I have no choice, that he's forcing this upon me, but I know the truth. I want this as much as he does. I love this. Which is why I have to end it.

I can't stay with him. It would be too intense. Too much to take. Trapped with a man who would turn into my father.

I have to get away as soon as possible. The only question is how best to do it. I can't think, not with what's happening right now.

He pulls out of me, turning me onto my back. “I want to look into your eyes,” he says as he lowers himself onto my body. He crushes me under him, kissing my neck, my lips, my chest.

With each touch of his lips, my inhibitions crack, shattering into pieces the longer he spends worshipping my body.

This powerful man, this dangerous man. All he cares about right now is me. It’s an intoxicating feeling.

Men died in this house. He was tortured. When I reach up and feel him, I can feel the marks where he was burned by the electrical cable. The ridges on his back a living testament to the childhood he had.

Is it any wonder he finds it hard to love? To care? After the way his father brought him up, to accept pain, to find it strengthening, to see emotion as weakness.

Then there’s the death of his family. He clearly blames himself for what happened five years ago. I’ve no doubt he thinks he can’t get too close to me in case I die. Yet, he let me go see Diego Garcia, knowing I might be killed.

I glance across at the vodka bottle as his kisses move over my stomach. Can I make him drink it? Should I make him drink it?

I thought about it the entire journey back. If he drinks it, he dies. What happens then? I’m no longer married. I have all the money I could ever want, if I can trust the cartel leader. I bring up a baby alone. I make my own way in the world.

Or I tell him it’s poisoned. He listens as I lay out my suggestion for what to do next. If he, for once, isn’t so stubborn as to refuse to listen, we could make it work. Diego might die. I will have a family, possibly. If he’s willing to stay with me.

A lot of ifs. A lot of maybes. A lot of potential for things to go wrong.

I guess what it all boils down to is whether or not I think Alexsei is capable of real change, of becoming the kind of man who could be a good father. Is that possible?

He moves back up my body, pushing all questions aside as he enters me. I look up into his eyes, seeing the hunger there, my own reflected in his gaze.

My hands run over his scars, my legs wrapping around him as he thrusts faster, his pelvis hitting my clit in just the right way.

“I’m going to come in you,” he says. “Because you’re my wife.”

“You’re my husband,” I reply. “Give it to me. Do it.”

He slams home and a moment later, my climax hits me. He spurts deep into me an instant later and the two of us bask in the bliss of this shared moment. For one second all doubts are gone. We are one. We are in perfect unison.

Then the moment passes and he’s sliding out of me. My eyes remain closed as I pant for breath, waiting for my heart rate to recover. My body aches as I sit up slowly. I open my eyes to see him pouring out a glass from the bottle of vodka.

“I haven’t drunk in five years,” he says, swilling the contents in his hand, examining them and smiling. “You want to know why?” The bicep in his arm flexes as he raises the glass.

“Why?”

“I was drunk the day my family got killed. Hell, I was drunk most days back then. Haven’t touched a drop since. Didn’t want to lose my edge. What do you reckon? Think I should still be scared of alcohol?”

“I didn’t think you were scared of anything.”

He shakes his head. “I guess you were wrong.”

He moves it toward his lips. “Don’t,” I snap, waving a hand toward him.

He turns to face me, smiling coldly. “Relax, I’m just smelling it.”

“Put it down.”

“Why? You don’t think I can handle it?”

“It’s poisoned.”

His smile broadens. "I know."

"You know? What do you mean, you know?"

"Come on, Mila. You go see my worst enemy. Then you show up with my favorite drink, one that you can't get hold of anywhere." His smile fades.

"What?"

"Trusting people gets you killed, don't you think?"

"What?"

"It wasn't Mrs. Aldova working for Diego. It was someone much closer to home."

"What am I missing here?"

"I'll explain later. Tell me something though. Would you have let me drink that?"

"No."

"Seemed a close run thing."

"It really wasn't."

"Thought you wanted me dead."

"I did... but I don't anymore."

"Why not?"

The words fall out of my mouth before I can stop them.
"Because I've fallen in love with you."

His smile doesn't return. He sets the glass down next to the bottle, looking at it closely. "I don't believe in love," he says quietly, spinning around to face me. "Does that surprise you?"

"No," I say, feeling a knife stabbing me in the heart. "I guess not."

"What was supposed to happen after I drank this?"

"I call Diego and he comes to see your body to make sure you're dead."

"Then what?"

"He pays me a million dollars and moves in here."

“You should have let me drink it.”

“You knew it was poisoned. You were testing me.”

“And you passed.”

“Then listen to this for some extra credit.” I explain my plan to him. He’s silent throughout, nodding slowly until I’m done.

“What do you think?” I ask when I’m finished.

“I think that’s so crazy it just might work.”

ALEXSEI

The gun is underneath me, ready. I lay perfectly still, listening to the conversation outside the coffin. There's a strange sense of peace being in here. It's lined with white velvet that's soft to the touch.

I expected to be afraid but I'm calm. This situation is like me and Mila. I expected to hate her, to hurt her, to break her. Instead, I would die to save her.

The sounds are muted but audible, courtesy of the earpiece connected to the microphone hidden in the ceiling above the ballroom. I'm in the anteroom off to the west, biding my time.

Mila is doing her best to set this up right. Diego is out there with at least a half dozen men, maybe more. I haven't enough bullets for all of them. What I do have is a plan.

Well, not my plan. It's Mila's. She's thought the whole thing through, way better than anything I could come up with. She's a genius. Got this whole thing figured out.

If this works, her problems are solved. No one attacking me any more. I run the entire city. We have our family.

If only she would give up believing in this love bullshit. It doesn't exist. It can't. If it did, we'd both be in a lot of trouble.

I know what she really wants. To be free of me. She knows the truth about who I am.

I'm a monster. Not capable of warmth. I would hurt her if she remained with me. Hurt our child too like I was hurt growing

up. That's what life is. Pain and suffering. Don't let anyone try to convince you otherwise. Pain, and power.

The door opens. Diego is walking in with her, leaving the others outside. I brace myself, hoping my arm won't go to sleep at the crucial moment.

"Thank you for speaking with me alone," Mila says. I breathe slow and shallow as I listen, making as little noise as possible. "I wanted to ask you about your plans."

"You mean will I uphold my end of our bargain?"

"Well, will you?"

"Alexsei is dead. You did your part. I am a man of my word. I will give you your money. You are a free woman."

"And what will you do?"

"Move in here, put my feet up. Perhaps keep the coffin, have him stuffed as a warning to my enemies. Use his skull as a goblet. I'm not sure yet."

"I'm not getting out of here, am I?"

He laughs but there's a coldness to it I don't like. "What makes you say that? I just told you I was upholding our deal."

"I've been in a mafia family all my life. I know when someone's lying to me."

The laugh continues. "Clever girl. What gave it away?"

"If you were going to give me the money, you'd have done it already, not wanted to meet me here, out of the public eye. All Alexsei's men gone from the house at your request. Setting up the funeral, leaving me alone to greet you. I knew, Diego."

"You're not as smart as you think you are."

"No?"

"You think I'm going to kill you but I'm not."

"You aren't? What are you going to do?"

"Give you back to your father."

"What?"

I hold my breath. I was about to burst out but I manage to wait as Diego continues to sign his own death warrant. “Your father was behind this whole thing. You think I’m the big man in the operation? No, no, no. Your father runs the cartel.”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s true. I work for him. He’s the one who wants Alexsei dead. Left all the details to me. I must say, it’s poetic that a man’s wife should take his life. A rhyme that works so well, so don’t think?”

“You’re saying my father wanted Alexsei dead?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“But why?”

“Because Alexsei bought you. Tricked your father into handing you over. Your father gets you back. The debts are gone. He splits the Volkov money with me and we run the rest of the Russian bastards out of the country.

“Drugs, guns, women, all of it goes through us for the rest of time. Oh, and he made me a deal as well. A wonderful deal. I’m sure you’re going to love it.”

“What is it?”

“I get you.”

“What?”

“He said that you need taking in hand and teaching how to behave and I’m the best man for the job. I have never had a woman fight me like you fight your husband.

“You will learn how to submit to me, Mila. Trust me, or I’ll break every bone in your body. Now, let’s have a look at the body of the only man who could have saved you from your destiny.”

He pushes up the coffin lid.

“What the fuck?” Diego says as I lift the gun so it’s pointing straight at his face.

Two things happen in the same instant. I yell out, “Trust no one,” and put a bullet in Diego’s skull as he looks down at me with a confused look on his face.

Through in the ballroom the bomb goes off, taking out Diego’s guards in one go. The sound is deafening, the walls cracking from the impact.

Diego falls to the floor, blood pooling under him. My ears ring as I climb out of the coffin.

Igor comes running in, covered in dust. He looks from me to Diego and back again. “You’re alive,” he says. “I thought you were dead.”

I grab him by the arm, sliding my hand around his throat. “You killed Mrs. Aldova and made it look like she was working for Diego. How long have you been working for Don Belucci?”

I tighten my grip. “Answer me or I break your neck.”

“Since he promised me the role of Pakhan,” he says in a wheeze, pulling ineffectually at my fingers.

“You son of a bitch, Igor. I trusted you. You were my friend.”

“Your father told you never to trust anyone,” he replies. “That was good advice.”

“Look out!” Mila shouts.

I glance down in time to see the knife coming toward me. I have no chance of avoiding it. I clench my stomach as it comes at me but it doesn’t make it.

There’s the noise of a gunshot next to me and then Igor is slipping out of my hands, the knife clattering harmlessly to the floor. His body falls onto Diego’s.

I turn and find Mila holding Diego’s gun in trembling fingers. I push it to the side as she stares in front of her. “You saved my life,” I tell her, kissing her forehead.

“I killed him,” she says, dropping the gun to the floor. “I killed a man.”

“You saved me.” I kiss her forehead. “Your plan worked.”

“My father,” she mutters. “He’s behind all this.”

“I know,” I reply. “Now we just need to decide what the hell we’re going to do about it.”

MILA

As one problem is solved, another comes along. That seems to be the way life goes. I get myself a boyfriend, he turns out to be an asshole. I run away from home and run out of money soon after.

Alexsei kills Diego but my father turns out to be the true culprit behind all this.

Alexsei kills Diego's guards and now he's got cracks up and down the walls of his house.

We've changed into clean things. He's taken me out to the Italian restaurant we went to before while the bodies are dealt with. Solves the problem of me being hungry. Creates a much bigger problem.

At least it's deliberate this time. He wants to antagonize my father into making a move. We're sitting eating spaghetti while the waiters whisper to each other over by the kitchen door.

At some point my father is going to hear about this. About Alexsei taking over, killing Diego without giving it a second thought.

Everyone thought Alexsei was dead. He's making a real show of himself in public, making sure everyone knows he's still around.

Word is already rippling out across the city. Diego's people keep calling, verbally prostrating themselves at the foot of the new king.

We're the only people in here, Alexsei paid the other diners to leave. Minimizing the risk of collateral damage, as he put it.

So, I eat my spaghetti, surprised by just how hungry I am. "You going to finish that?" I ask as he pushes his plate away.

"Be my guest," he replies as I slide it my way.

"Why am I so hungry?" I ask. "I feel like I haven't eaten for weeks."

"You killed a man. The first time always gives you an appetite."

"Really?"

"You are truly one of the Volkov family now. My wife killed the head of the Garcia cartel. You will be feared by all. I am proud of you."

I manage a smile. "I think that's the first time anyone's ever been proud of me."

He glances over my shoulder. "Things are going to happen soon," he says, taking a sip of his mineral water. "Your father will attempt to kill me."

"He might not. You're my husband. He will respect that, won't he?"

"He thinks you were forced into this marriage, that you would do anything to get out of it. He will not believe you killed Diego. He will think it a rumor I am putting about."

"But why would you do that?"

"A man like your father, he will not care for my reasons, only for his beliefs. He wants me dead. It is entirely possible he set all this up to see who survived out of me and Diego. That way he only has to take on one of us, not both. It was a clever move on his part. I underestimated the old man."

"What are you going to do?"

"He will have heard by now that we are here. He will see it as a provocation. I have no doubt he will mount an attack on my home, same as five years ago. Only things are very different this time around."

“How so?”

“More secure, for a start. I am ready for his men. He has received a message from Igor, telling him the defenses are weak. He has no idea I am sending him the messages.”

“What will you do when they come to the house?”

“Kill them all.”

I want to tell him that murder is wrong but how can I say that, after what I’ve just done? Diego’s dead because of me. I took out the man who had me kidnapped, only to find out he was working for my father.

I scrape my plate clean, wiping my mouth with my napkin.
“What happens after the attack?”

“I kill your father.”

I set my fork and spoon down. “Oh,” I say quietly.

“I thought you’d protest.”

“So did I. Guess we were both wrong.”

“There’s no other way.”

“I know. I don’t have to like it though.”

“You care for that asshole?”

“He’s an asshole but I love him. He’s my father.”

“I told you, there’s no such thing as love. It doesn’t exist.”

“Then tell me something, why do you give a shit what happened to your family five years ago?”

He doesn’t answer. Instead, he pays the check and then tells me we’re leaving. He says nothing the entire drive back to his place. Only when we’re climbing out of the car and heading inside does he speak to me again.

He stops dead in the doorway, blocking me from going inside. “Let’s just make one thing clear,” he says, his voice devoid of emotion. “You don’t ever talk about my family again.”

“You know what? That’s the way you want it, fine.”

“Glad we’re clear.”

He walks away and I follow, not willing to let the conversation end yet. “You don’t want a wife, not really, do you?”

He stops, turning to look at me. “What are you talking about?”

“You want a robot. Someone to switch off at the back when you’re bored. Maybe a sex doll with self cleaning ability.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You don’t want to talk about your family because it hurts. Because you loved them and they died. Guess what, be a fucking man and admit it for once in your life. You know there’s no shame in loving someone, right? No need to pretend to be this cold dead inside asshole just like my father. I know you, Alexsei, I see you.

“You’re capable of love, of affection, of admitting you’re in pain. You’re still grieving them because you won’t let yourself accept the pain of losing them. All of this, the whole revenge thing, has just been a distraction from dealing with your grief.”

I put a hand on his arm. “You loved your family and they died. That was a terrible thing.”

He lifts my hand from him, turning and walking away without another word.

That’s when I make my decision. If he can’t become the person I know he can be, there’s no point staying with him. I could put up with the rudeness, the arrogance, everything.

As long as I knew it was going somewhere. But the thought of him remaining this way for the rest of our lives, of raising our child while he glares and scowls and refuses to ever open up to me? I can’t do it.

I push open the nearest door and duck inside, sinking into a chair and putting my head in my hands. Now I’ve made a decision, I need to decide what to do next.

The door opens and he’s standing there looking like nothing has changed from the first time we met. “I will deal with your father,” he says. “Then I will let you go. That’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“What do you want, Alexsei?”

“For all this to be over. I wanted you because your father was responsible for my family’s death. I wanted to hurt him through you. I wanted to hurt you too. I don’t want to do that anymore.

“I will find an heir with someone else. Once your father is dead, you will be safe wherever you want to be. I will pay you for your gallery and we never need to see each other again.”

“I have your child growing inside me, Alexsei. Did you forget that part?”

“I will pay what is needed to support you both but you will go. That’s what you wanted, isn’t it?”

“I guess so.”

“Good.”

He pulls the door closed again, leaving me wondering how I could ever have thought I was falling in love with him.

ALEXSEI

The call connects. A wisp of smoke rises from my cigar as I set it down in the ashtray. I lean back in my seat, refusing to think about what Mila just said to me.

It's better I let her go. She must see that, surely. If she remains with me, her life will be hell. I cannot open up to her. I cannot open up to anyone.

Trust no one. That's what my father taught me. He taught me well. If I'd listened, Igor wouldn't have betrayed me, just like Mila will betray me sooner or later.

People betray you. They stab you in the back. That's life. I am better off alone. I will pay someone to provide me with an heir, get a contract upfront so they have nothing to do with the child once it's born.

I'll have an heir and won't have to have all these fucking feelings that I don't want coursing through me. Infecting me with pain I don't need.

There is no love. I hurt when my family died because they were family. It's about respect, not love. She is wrong.

She must leave. After her father is dead. Which is about to be arranged.

"Don Belucci," I say down the line.

"Alexsei Volkov," he replies. "Am I speaking to you beyond the grave? Only I heard you had passed away."

"She told me the truth about the vodka."

He grunts. "I might have guessed. You tricked her into falling for you, is that it? Made her believe all that bullshit about husbands and wives taking care of each other. That is more than cruel, Alexsei. It is evil to convince a girl of such lies."

"This ends, Belucci. Diego is dead. You're next."

He sighs. "Is it the same for you, Alexsei? A life of suspicion and paranoia? I tire of it at times. Do you know that?"

"Then let it go, old man."

"The cards have been dealt. They must be played. That is the game."

"You are going to die."

"All men die. Tell me the truth. Do you love my daughter?"

"I do."

"That is why my plan failed. I was so sure you could not love. Not after what happened to you. You have a world of enemies, real, and shadows in your own head. You must feel the fear that I feel that this life is cursed.

"You know, I wish I had remained a shoe maker like my father. I think I would have been happier that way. He told me to stay away from the mafia. Said I would spend my life afraid for those I love. Joke was on him. I never loved anyone."

"Not even your daughter?"

"She was an asset to be used. That is this life. Do you not feel the same?"

A moment of epiphany hits me as I glance down at my desk. A red light is flashing. I curse myself. This entire time he was talking, it was just to keep me distracted. "You will die," I tell him again. "For threatening my wife's safety."

"We will see, Alexsei. The game has a few more moves to play yet. She will not have your child, you know that, right?"

"She is under my protection. You will not get near her."

"Won't have to. She'll come to me soon enough."

"You're sure about that?"

“As certain as I am about anything. You think you’re this big clever man, Alexsei, but you’re not. You cleared my debts in return for my girl but I’ll get my girl back and I’ll piss on your grave by the end of the week. You see, that’s the difference between you and I.

“You think you’re cold but you’re not. You’ve got a heart under that exterior and it will get you killed. While we’re talking, I’ve been moving on your house and my men are about to attack. Tell you what, give yourself up without fighting and I’ll let the rest of your staff go with their lives.”

“A generous offer. Here’s my counter-offer. You kill yourself. Save me the trouble of doing it.”

“So much bravado but you don’t even know where I am.”

“I’ll find you.”

I hang up, and hit the button under the desk. “Belucci’s men have breached the outer perimeter,” I say into the microphone by the computer. “Be ready.”

I get to my feet. I must make sure my wife is safe. Like Don Belucci said, the game has a few more moves left to play. It is time to play them.

My father could not guarantee my family’s safety. Can I guarantee Mila’s? Do I love her? Is that why I must push her away? To keep her from being hurt by the monster I am?

I walk back to the room where I left her. She is still sitting there. She looks up at me with tears in her eyes. I want to embrace her. Instead, I beckon her toward me. “The attack is about to begin,” I say. “We must get you somewhere safe. Come with me.”

She gets to her feet. “You spoke to my father.”

“You can tell?”

“From the look on your face, sure I can. What did he say?”

“That he’s going to kill me and make you abort our child.”

Her hand goes to her stomach, rubbing it slowly. “He said that?”

“Do not worry. I will not let him hurt you.” I take her into the study, pulling open the secret door. “Get in the car, drive far away. There’s a cellphone in the side of the door. I’ll call you when it’s safe for you to come back.”

“I’m not leaving.”

“What?”

“I said I’m not leaving.”

“Yes, you are.”

“If Igor knew about this door and this tunnel, so will my father. I’ll be snatched before I make it ten feet outside.”

I curse as I realize she’s right. I shut the door again. “Fine, but you do exactly what I tell you.”

“So, no different to any other time then.”

“You go into my bedroom. You lock the door. You don’t open it to anyone but me. You got it?”

“That I can do.”

“There’s a gun in there. Anyone else but me comes to your door, you shoot, got it?”

“Got it.”

“Good.” I lean forward, unable to resist kissing her. “When this is over, we’ll talk.”

Her eyes light up but only briefly, like she won’t allow herself to get optimistic. “Just don’t die,” she says, kissing me back.

“Got it?”

MILA

His blankets smell of him. That dark musky fragrance, mixed with the depths of the forest. Something intangible, something as mysterious as he is.

For all his simplicity, there is clearly a depth to him that I'm only just getting to see hints of, just as our time comes together comes to an end.

He won't change. That much is clear. He has to want to change and it's become obvious that he doesn't want to. He's happy being this cold, dead hearted bastard. Refuses to admit he's got a splinter in his heart that will only fall out once he admits the pain he's in.

How long has he grieved for his family? Five long years, blaming my father for everything that happened to them.

No. Blaming himself. Lashing out at those around him but thinking deep down that he failed them all. Wanting revenge through me.

I won't give him the satisfaction. He doesn't want to admit that love is real. Fine, let him sulk like a little kid. Doesn't mean I have to go down the same route. I can make my own way in the world, like I always wanted.

I might not have a husband or any money but I'll have something much more precious. I'll have a child. A little broken family, that will be all I need.

I don't need him. He'll kill my father, I should hate him for that alone.

I lay on his bed and put his pillow over my head, breathing him in. The scent sparks things deep inside me.

I should be afraid right now. I've no idea what's happening out there. I have a gun and a locked door but that might not be enough to protect me. I should be fearing for my life.

Instead, I'm breathing in his smell and remembering everything that's happened since I first met him.

My mind can't help but slip into smut. I breathe him in and think of him in this bed, his hands on me, my body reacting to his touch with so much heat I think I might catch fire.

It's all been so good. Not a single dud moment. Nothing like how I imagined it would be. He knows exactly what to do to turn me on, how far to tease me, how to tip me over the edge. It's all been perfect, everything I could have hoped for and much, much more.

He won't change. He won't admit he loves me. He'll be cold to me, like my father, distant, like my father. He'll use me to bring up his child but he'll never share a life, become a family.

I breathe him in again, my body tingling. Maybe it's the threat of death, maybe it's my own fucked up mind, maybe it's just because I'm in his bedroom. Whatever the reason, I find myself getting increasingly turned on. I picture him in bed with me, his hands sliding down my pants, taking them from me.

The door's locked. No one's coming in.

I unbutton my jeans, imagining him doing it. His thick fingers on my panties, ripping them apart. His mouth between my legs, kissing my clit, plunging his tongue into me. Looking up, telling me he loves me. He's always loved me. Letting down his guard for once in his life. Admitting the truth. He can change. For me. Because of me.

My hand moves into my panties, stroking my soft folds, feeling the wetness forming as I continue to breathe in his scent. It's like he's here with me, watching as I do this. I push down my panties, lifting my top, finding my over-sensitive

nipples and brushing them lightly. My hips push up of their own accord. I want him in me.

My fingers will have to do. I lick them and then push two into myself, letting out a moan of enjoyment as I picture him watching me, stroking himself as he does so.

My clit demands attention. I move my hand up to ease the throbbing sensation, drawing more moans from the back of my throat. I push up into empty air again, wishing he was in me right now, wanting to feel that sensation of him coming deep inside me, my body tipping him over the edge of a climax so he spurts deep inside me, filling me up with his seed.

I feel myself getting close to an orgasm. I know I should stop but I can't. It's like when he touches me. I want to tell him to stop but he overpowers my sense of reason, my ability to think.

It hits me a moment later. My pussy contracts around nothing, my clit sending waves of pleasure shooting through my body. I let out a groan of pleasure as I collapse back onto the blankets. There's the rattle of a key in the lock and I'm still scrambling to pull up my panties when it opens. My fingers refuse to obey me so I settle for shoving the pillow between my legs as Alexsei walks in, looking furious.

"This is what you do while I'm fighting for our lives?" he asks, closing the door behind him. "I told you to be ready and you do this?"

I manage to get hold of my panties, slipping them back into place, lifting my ass to pull up my jeans a moment later. "You could have knocked," I say, brushing my hair out of my eyes.

"My bedroom, my house, my rules."

"What happened out there?"

"The attack failed. Your father has agreed to a truce. He knows he cannot take me by force. He knows my men outnumber his own. He has failed. It is over."

"Yet, you don't look happy."

“I wanted to kill him. Now I won’t get that chance without provoking another war.”

I climb out of the bed, examining his face. “You genuinely look disappointed. Aren’t you glad you don’t have to kill anyone else?”

He grunts. “You are free to leave.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Don’t make me throw you out of here. Go.”

“You really want me to go?”

He grunts again. “I know you want to leave. You spent a long time trying to escape. This is your chance. There is a car outside. It will take you wherever you want to go. Now get out of my sight.”

“Then I guess this is goodbye.”

He holds the door open for me. “Do svidaniya, Mila.”

ALEXSEI

She had to go. You understand that, right? I couldn't keep her here, not after all this. I've bodies to clear up, an empire to run.

I haven't got time to be dealing with a woman who wants nothing to do with me except peck at the edges of my mind. Trying to drag out emotions that don't exist.

Love isn't real. The sooner she gets used to that fact, the better. She's too fucking naive to see the world for what it really is. A shitshow.

She thinks I can change? Thinks I want to change? Fuck that. I'm happy as I am. Killing is what I know and it's how shit gets done.

I'm not going to sit down and talk to Don Belucci and pretend everything is fine. I'm going to let him calm down, lower his guard. Then I'm going to put a bullet in his head.

Not because he threatened her. Because it's the right thing to do for my business interests.

Which are the only things that matter.

I will have an heir. When it's born, I will take the child from her because I need it. She will grumble and whine but who gives a shit about that?

I will not let emotions stop me from doing what needs to be done. I should not have run the night my family died.

I should have told my father to shoot me, forced him to accept he needed my help. Instead, I was a coward and I ran. They died.

I will not fall for Mila, no matter how blue her eyes, no matter how soft her touch, or how gentle her moans when I touch her. Falling for someone means being vulnerable and I cannot allow that to happen. Ever.

It's simple enough. She leaves. Goes and gets through the pregnancy. The child is born. I take it from her. I divorce her. She gets money. I get an heir. She'll take the money and be grateful for it or I'll have her killed.

That's who I am. I know that. In my heart. I am a monster. I am not someone she should even want to be around.

Seeing her touching herself in my bedroom, feelings flooded me that I refuse to think about. I will not fall for her. There is no such thing as love.

Trust no one. That's the mantra. That's the words that are carved into my soul. Look what happened when I trusted Igor. Bastard flipped and joined the cartel. After all these years working for my family, he flipped when it was expedient. She'd do the same, turn on me when it worked in her favor.

Fuck that and fuck her. I will kill her father. I will win this thing. I never lose. I always get what I want.

You want her, don't you?

That voice has been whispering to me ever since I first set eyes on Mila. It's a quiet voice, easy to ignore. The truth is I don't want anyone. Don't need anyone. Except an heir to take over when I'm gone, keep the family name alive.

I don't need her. What I need is to admit the truth to myself. You cannot change your nature. You have to accept who you are. I know who I am. What I am. A name to bring fear to the hearts of my enemies. Of which there is only one left. One who will soon be dead.

I look out of the window of my study as the car drives away. Mila is inside. No doubt glad to be leaving. She was right of course. I am a coldhearted bastard.

I will take her child from her when it is born. I will pay her off. Then I will never see her again. She can forget her kid exists, move on with her life.

I walk out of the study and across the corridor until I reach the kitchen. I take a bottle of vodka from the shelf where it sits with the rest of the alcohol, waiting for guests to arrive.

I look at the bottle. Five years without drinking. That voice still whispering to me that I should call her back, tell her I love her.

Not happening. I don't believe in love.

I unscrew the cap and pour out a glass. I lift it up and sniff it, swirling the contents. Then I hurl the glass against the far wall, the sound of it shattering loud in the silence of the kitchen.

I walk back out and go to my study. I have plans to make and I need to be sober to make them. I can drink when this is done but not yet. I need to work out how long it will take Don Belucci to lower his guard. First thing to do, is go over the next couple of sales of merchandise, make sure my crews are settling into the cartel territory without too much trouble.

I keep myself occupied for a couple of hours with figuring things out, making calls. When I'm done it's late and I think about getting a shower.

I head up to my room and my blankets are still a mess from where she was sprawled across them. I pick up the pillow. It has her scent on it from when she crammed it between her legs. The smell gets me hard in an instant.

I'll never fuck her again. Never feel those soft lips of hers against my own. The thought hurts but the pain will fade. Like the scars on my back, soon it will be background noise, like the birds singing outside in the mornings.

Life is pain. I'm used to it. She's not. It's better this way. She's better out of it. Remain here and she'll end up hurt by me. I have no doubts about that at all.

I undress and climb into the shower, jerking off with my eyes closed, the water running down over my chest. I think of her body, the sounds she makes when she comes. It doesn't take

long to come. When I do, I imagine her calling my name, clawing at my back, pulling me deep inside her, moaning in my ear.

I turn the water cold, dousing thoughts of her in freezing temperatures. By the time I dry myself, I'm not thinking about her at all. Not one bit.

MILA

The apartment has a musty smell. I open the windows to air it out before sorting through the pile of mail that's arrived since I was last here.

How long has it been? Long enough for everything in the refrigerator to be long dead. The smell in there is worse than the air. Mold and rotting.

I dump everything in there into the trash and clean it out properly. I can treat this as a fresh start. Like I've just moved in. I'll dust and vacuum later. For now I need to work out how I'm going to pay the bills.

I need a job that pays well enough to afford to move. I have no savings. How am I supposed to get out of here and support my child with no money?

I'll have to keep the pregnancy secret for now. No one will hire me knowing I'll need leave to give birth soon enough.

Eight months until the baby's born. A lot can happen in that time. Maybe Alexsei will get in touch, realize his mistake. Tell me he's sorry and that he can change. He will change.

Yeah, right.

He's probably got a load of hookers at his house already, laughing at the memory of dear, sweet, innocent me.

He was my first. My only. And now it's over.

When the cleaning's done, I check my laptop. It's taken thirty minutes to boot up and connect to the Internet but it's managed

it. I check out some vacancies. All of them need experience I haven't got.

I won't take Alexsei's money. I don't want anything from him. I don't want anything to do with him. If he can't accept that he needs to change, then that's on him. He doesn't get to have a hold over me, not anymore.

I'll get by on my own but not here. I walk into the bedroom and remember the night they came and snatched me. My father's men, three of them. All now dead in the attack on Alexsei's place.

Terry's cologne is still on the dressing table. I pick it up and sniff it, dread rising in me. So different from the scent of Alexsei and what that does to me.

I dump the bottle in the trash, adding his toothbrush and the hoodie of his that somehow ended up in my drawer. I go back to the kitchen and make myself a coffee.

I tell myself it's all back to normal but I'm afraid. I don't want to be here. I don't like the thought of staying here anymore. The place has too many bad memories.

I rummage through everywhere I can think of, piling up every dollar bill and bit of loose change that I can find. It adds up to seventy-four dollars and fifty-two cents. Enough for a bus ride but not too far. Maybe I can hitch somewhere, anywhere but here.

I could go to some small town faraway, start again, change my name. Put all this behind me.

I will always miss Alexsei but it won't be the real him I'll be missing. It'll be the him I wish he would become. The one who accepts emotions are real, that love is real, that what he felt for me was real.

I know he loves me. I know that deep inside himself he's scared of love. He blames himself for his family's death, believes what his father told him. That he should trust no one. Ever.

The world isn't so simple. That's what I would tell him if I saw him again. It's not black and white. It's all the colors of

the rainbow.

I know he could be a good father but only if he believes that and he's made clear that he doesn't. He thinks he can't change so fuck him. Why should I hang around with a man who threw me out? Who told me my child will be his heir and that's that. No one else gets a say in things.

To hell with that. I will not hang around with a man who refuses to be all he can be. I deserve better than that. My child deserves better than that.

I gather up my money and shove it in my purse. Time to start packing.

I dig a case out from under my bed. I choose two of each thing. Enough to get me moving but not so much that I won't be able to carry the case onto the bus. I add a toothbrush and a couple of books. I look around me. Do I need anything else? It's all tainted by what happened here. I don't want any of it.

I shove the case closed and head for the door. I'm barely through it before they descend on me.

Three of them. Just like last time. Only it's not Pietro in charge. It's a man I've never seen before. He's got a match between his teeth like he's in a gangster movie as he takes hold of my arm, twisting it painfully behind my back.

Someone else gets a hand over my mouth just as I breathe in ready to scream.

"Can it," match man says, leaning close enough for me to smell the hair oil he uses. "Your father wants to see you. Any idea how long we've been casing this place, hoping you'd turn up here. You cost me fifty bucks. I told the old man you wouldn't be dumb enough to come back but you're stupider than I gave you credit for."

He bends my arm so far I think it's going to break. I let out a scream but it's muffled by the hand over my face. "Here's what's going to happen," he continues.

"We're going to walk out of here together. You're going to climb in the back of our car and you're going to go have a nice family visit with your father. You run, I break something. You

scream, I break two things. You try anything at all and I'll make sure you don't walk for a month. Got it? Nod if you understand."

I nod, slowly, my eyes wide with fear and rage. If Alexsei was here, you'd be the one having things broken, I think to myself. He'd snap their necks and not bat an eyelid while he did it.

For the first time since I left, I wish he was with me. Even the asshole version of him would be better than these three, holding onto me as they lead me over to the elevator. "Remember," match man says as he hits the call button. "Not a word."

He nods and the hand over my mouth slackens. I look around me at the other two. They could be twins. Tanned skin, slicked back hair, cheap gray suits that are ill-fitting, stained in places.

"Not a word," match man says again as the doors open. "Out to the car. Now."

ALEXSEI

I'm watching a shipment of merchandise taking place. The cops have been bought off so there's no risk of anyone disturbing things. It's the first batch coming in from Garcia's factories.

Things are running well. My people are working hard and soon the profits will come rolling in. Whatever people want to buy, we'll sell it to them. You can't afford morals if you want to make money.

If I don't sell stuff, someone else will, right? Might as well be the one to make money from things. That's what matters. Money. Gives you the freedom to do what you want.

It's the reason Mila will have her art gallery. It's the reason I have the house I do, the lifestyle I want. It's all that matters in this world.

There's no need for me to be here. My men are nervous, knowing the big boss is watching them as they unload the boxes from the truck. I haven't told them I'm checking on them. They know it.

None of them know the truth.

I'm here because I need a distraction from thinking about Mila. All I want to do is bring her back. She's my wife. She should be by my side.

I won't do it. I won't have her in my life trying to chip away at me, at my perfect world. She thinks she can peel away the layers of me and reveal some weak whiny asshole inside.

I'm not going to let her. I am strong. I don't need her. I don't need anyone.

I've got my people watching her place, just in case. I don't want her getting hurt while I deal with her father. The last thing I need is her death on my conscience.

Last night I found myself wondering if I'd made the right decision. Should I have kept her at home? Then I remember how she looked at me, the disgust in her eyes. She knows I can't change, same as I know it. Why pretend otherwise?

She's better off without me. She'll be happier. I'll be happier. I'll take her kid and raise it to become me heir but that's it. She can go on with her life.

She's only going to hate me more when I kill her father. There's no point pretending it can work out between us.

The last of the boxes are unloaded and I nod to the driver who gets in and heads out of the warehouse. Done. The first shipment since Diego died. No cut to pay for it. We make the stuff. We bring it north. We rake in the profit.

Another year of this and I'll have enough money to expand across the country. Take on the Italians at their own game. Might even move into contract killing. Lot of money to be made there, especially with the men I have on my books. Good men. Violent men. Like me.

There's a tap on my shoulder. Viktor is holding a cellphone out toward me. "Luka's got in touch," he says. "You want to take this."

"I thought I said I was not to be disturbed for anything."

"Except Mila, right?"

I snatch the phone out of his hand and hold it up to my ear. "Three of them," Luka says down the line. "Took her out and loaded her into a car."

"Where is it now?"

"Tracked it to Belucci's place. Disappeared inside."

"You're sure she was inside?"

“Certain. You want me to go in and get her?”

“You’ll be cut to ribbons. We need to go in big. Get as many together as you can and meet me at the gas station near Belucci’s. Make sure you’ve got plenty of firepower.”

I hang up and turn to Viktor. “Finish up here and then send me everyone.”

“Everyone? What about weighing the boxes?”

“I don’t give a shit about that. I want my entire fucking army ready to go in ten minutes and if anyone’s missing, I’ll cut your fucking head off.”

He turns pale. I stride over to my car and climb inside, hitting the gas and heading out. What have I got in the trunk? Sniper rifle. AK-47. Two pistols, one silenced. Enough ammo to take out Belucci and his men on my own.

I know the layout of his place. I studied it back when my family died, wanting to walk in as a one man army. Luckily for me, I decided to wait, to train, to get back on top. To take over. Play the long game.

Time for the final move.

I know what he’ll be planning to do to her. He told me she won’t have my child, made that clear. He’ll kill her to taunt me if I don’t get there in time.

He’s fallen for my trap exactly as I planned. He has my wife. Under the code of the Bratva, I am within my rights to kill him. Even the five families of the Italian Mafia cannot dispute that.

There will be no war. The five families will not fight me on this. They will accept that he had to die.

It is a pity that I had to use Mila as bait to make this happen. Even now I feel a new emotion. Guilt. Should I have sent her away knowing he would likely take her? Not tell any of my men what my plan was?

No, it had to be this way. If I’d kept her with me, Belucci would have kept fighting, kept breathing. Kill him then and war would have ruined my business. Taken up all my time.

This way is the simplest. I get in there, get her out, kill him. She will be safe. He will be dead. I come out on top. I have the victory I have waited five long years to achieve. She carries my child, which enrages him.

I just have to make sure I get there before he kills her. I doubt he will do it immediately. His play is easy to predict. Call me and tell me he has her. Offer to swap her for me. I turn up. He kills me. Simple.

Only I'm already on the way to his place and I'm going to get in before he gets chance to kill me. Take him out. Tell Mila it's over. Tell her the truth about why I sent her away, the truth I didn't tell anyone. She went to be bait for my plan.

That guilt hits me again as I drive. I should have kept her close. She's my wife. I'm her husband. I should protect her at all times. I did a bad thing, sending her away.

Am I the monster she says I am? Am I using her for my own ends? Or am I doing this so she will be safe at last? Never have to look over her shoulder in fear, ever again?

Who am I?

MILA

My father walks beside me across the lawn. My shoes are getting wet. He never sorted out the drainage so the soil under the grass squelches with each step. He pretends not to notice, pointing out the features he's installed since I left home the first time.

"See these railings," he says, waving lazily toward the house. "Surrounds the entire place. Had them painted bright white. Wanted them to look beautiful and they do."

"Makes it look like a prison," I reply.

"You're wrong," he snaps, spinning around and walking toward the new pond. "This is eight feet deep. Thought about putting sharks in there but apparently it would need to be deeper still. Maybe next year when the money really starts rolling in."

"Sure, Dad. Why not go full Bond villain and get some revolving fireplaces too."

"That's not a bad idea. Perhaps I will."

I wish he was joking but he never jokes. I glance around me. There's no point trying to run. Whichever way I look, I can see men with guns. The place is well guarded. I'm trapped here.

"You should have stayed home," he says, kicking a leaf onto the surface of the pond. "I could have raised you right, made sure you didn't turn into this."

He points at me. "All this bluster and pretending to be better than men. That's what the modern world does, teaches girls

like you all the wrong things.”

“Like what?”

“Like how you’re equal to me. You’re not. You’re a woman. The Bible says you let men take charge. We’re built to tell you what to do. You’re built to do what you’re told.”

“Nice. Real nice.”

He walks back toward the house, pointing at the largest spike on the railings. “In the middle ages, they used to put traitors heads on spikes like this, let everyone see what happened to them. Isn’t that funny?”

“Not really.”

“It is funny. I’ll be laughing even more when it’s your husband’s head staring out from that very spike. Every single day he’ll rot a bit more, bits falling off until there’s only his skull left.

“Then I’ll turn it into a goblet and drink from it every morning. He thought he could beat me but I’ve got plans for him, all right. Yes, I have.”

I say nothing. I pray Alexsei ignores the call my father made, the message he left him. Offering my life for his. I don’t want him to come here, to die for me.

I want him to keep his shields up. Better a bastard and alive than being drawn here by love and then dying. What good would that do?

“Come with me,” my father says, walking up the steps to the open front door. “There’s something upstairs I want to show you.”

I glance behind me. Two men with guns are flanking me. No chance to run, even if I thought I could get away before I was shot down. I’m trapped here.

I feel a sudden fury toward my father. A deep sorrow that he is this way. But also an anger that he thinks I will simply bend to his will. That I will be grateful for him killing Alexsei.

We walk up the stairs and he pushes open a door into a room that's been converted into a medical center.

Metal table, stirrups at the end. Monitors with green screens, drawers, scalpels on trays, a deep sink at the end where a doctor is scrubbing his hands. "What the fuck is this?" I ask, backing away from the door, bumping into the two armed men outside.

My father pulls me in. "Wait out there," he tells the men. "You don't need to see this." They close the door and then my father locks it.

He turns to face me, pointing at the table. "That is where you will climb on and keep still. I told Alexsei you would not have his child and I intend to keep my word."

I look across at the doctor who's now gulping from a whisky bottle, a strange grin on his face, like he's enjoying this a little too much.

I shake my head, my hands going to my stomach. "You can't do this."

"There are pills you can take at this early stage. If you're willing to take them, he won't have to do a thing other than make sure they worked."

"It's my child, father. Please, don't do this to me."

"Enough begging. The pills are there. Take them or we do this the painful way."

"Please," I whisper, shaking my head. "Don't do this."

He nods toward the doctor who comes toward me holding pills in one hand and the whisky bottle in the other. "Do it," my father says. "Easy way or the hard way. That's the only choice you've got here."

"Fuck that," I say. I reach for the pills. His eyes follow them, not seeing me twisting the whisky bottle with my other hand.

I swing the bottle through the air and it slams into the doctor's cheek, shattering and coating him in booze.

He shrieks as the glass cuts deep into his face. I turn with the jagged splinters, lunging for my father.

He's already whipping out a gun, pointing it my way. I jump to the right, jabbing at him with the broken bottle. I catch his arm and the gun fires, the doctor dropping dead to the floor.

"You stupid bitch," he says. "He's the best damned doctor we have." He jumps at me and I step aside at the last second. He trips, falling over the doctor, the gun going off again.

When he stands up, there's red wetness in his hands. He's holding them over his stomach.

"I shot," he says, his face turning white. His eyes darken and he roars as he runs at me. I sprint for the door and then remember the two men out there.

I swerve around the metal table, my father still running at me. He staggers as I stop. There's nothing behind me but the window. I've nowhere left to run.

"Got you now," he says, reaching his hands out for me. "Stay where you are."

"You don't get to tell me what to do," I reply, grabbing him by the shoulders and yanking him off his feet. I don't know where my strength comes from but I toss him to one side.

He tries to right himself but he stumbles, his hands catching on the windowsill. As he tries to right himself his hands, still wet with blood, slip and gravity tips him over the edge.

The glass shatters and he falls through, one hand reaching out to me. "Help," he says as he goes but I do nothing.

A second later he's gone from sight, screaming as he falls before the scream cuts off like a switch has been flicked.

I look out the window in time to see him impaled on one of the railings far below. I grimace at the sight and then I gasp as I hear gunshots out in the corridor. Are my father's men coming to finish me off?

The door bursts open, crashing on the hinges. I hold up the broken bottle but it's not the goons. It's Alexsei.

He has a smoking pistol in his hand. He looks from me to the doctor to the window. "Are you all right?" he asks, tossing the gun aside.

I give him a weak smile. "I've had better days."

"What happened?"

More gunshots outside. I look out of the window and see Alexsei's men sweeping across the lawn, more men than I can count. The last of my father's guards are being shot down where they stand.

I turn back and Alexsei is right in front of me. He looks out the window and sees my father. "Did you do that?" he asks.

"He did it to himself."

I'm swept into Alexsei's arms. "I was stupid," he says. "I sent you away to encourage your father to take you but I've regretted it from the moment you left my sight. Can you forgive me?"

"You used me as bait?"

"I knew your father would offer to exchange you for me. I needed an excuse to kill him without provoking war and him taking my wife was a legitimate reason."

"Wow." I push him away from me. "You acted like this coldhearted asshole just to get revenge on my dad?"

"I did."

"Wait, so you aren't a coldhearted asshole?"

No, I am. But I'm also in love with you."

I blink, looking him right in the eye as he stares back at me.

"What did you say?"

"I said I love you."

"Thought you didn't believe in love."

"I don't but let's keep it between you and me."

He leans down and kisses me gently. The sound of gunfire dies away outside. "This is your house now," he says. "How's that feel?"

“Odd.”

“I bet.”

He kisses me again, his hand slipping into mine. “Reckon you can forgive me?” he asks.

“Nope, but let’s keep that between you and me.”

ALEXSEI

“That’s the last of it,” Mila says, dumping the case on the bedroom floor.

“The last of it? That’s one suitcase.”

She shrugs. “There’s not a lot of stuff that I need.”

“You’re telling me that everything you want from your apartment is in that case?”

“For now, yeah.”

“Not for now. For good. You’re my wife. You’re living here with me. Your lease is up. The keys are handed over tomorrow. Anything left after that will get dumped. You don’t want anything else?”

“Not really. I mean, I might need some more clothes but seeing as my super rich husband very kindly offered to buy me an entire wardrobe’s worth, I’m not sure my ripped jeans and stained tee-shirts needed to come over here with me.”

“I don’t remember saying I’d buy you clothes. I thought you wanted to support yourself, not depend on me for everything.”

“I said a lot of things.” She winks at me. “Seem to remember saying I’d still respect you after we slept together.”

“When did you say that?”

“Maybe I said it inside my head.”

I point a finger at her. “You’re getting cocky. This will not be tolerated.”

“And what’s my big, bad, Bratva husband going to do about it?”

I grab hold of her, lifting her over my shoulder and carrying her over to the bed. I toss her onto it. “All fours,” I say in a low growl.

She scrambles into place, looking back over her shoulder. I lift her skirt only to find she’s not wearing any panties.

“You didn’t mention that to me,” I tell her, spanking her ass a moment later.

“Oh, did I forget to put them on? How careless of me.”

“Am I supposed to believe that?”

“You’re the great reader of character. Am I lying?”

I spank her again and she gasps. “Ow! That hurt.”

“It’s meant to. You spent the morning at your apartment, packing. You went to a coffee shop and the grocery store on the way here and all that time, you had no panties on.”

“So you are still stalking me.”

“Making sure my wife is safe does not count as stalking.”

“Pity, I kind of liked the idea of an obsessive Russian brute watching my every move.”

My hand slides between her legs. “So, I’m a brute, am I?”

“Oh, definitely. No feelings, just animal lust and violence. That’s all you are.”

I spank her a few more times. “Enough talking. Take your punishment.”

“You don’t get to tell me what to do.”

“Yes, I do. Now spread your legs and put your head down.”

She obeys at once. I unzip my pants, pulling out my cock and stroking it slowly as I stare at her. “Such beauty,” I say, grasping the tip to ease the throbbing need that builds there. “All for me.”

“If you say so.”

“You are mine, Mila. For the rest of our lives.”

“That’s good because I’ve nowhere else to go.”

“That’s the only reason you stay?”

“Well, there might be one other reason.” She wriggles her hips, pushing her ass back toward me. “If you catch my drift.”

“You are insatiable.”

“Hey, you made me this way. Giving me so much great sex was asking for trouble.”

I kneel behind her, gliding my cock into her wetness, pushing deep into her. “Glad you approve.”

“Oh, I definitely approve.”

I pull back and push into her again, watching as her hand slides under herself to play with her clit. I rock back and forth, teasing her slowly, occasionally spanking her ass to keep her from tipping over into an orgasm.

As my speed picks up, she moans under me, the sound muffled by the blankets.

“Onto your back,” I tell her, sliding out and watching as she rolls over. “I want to see your face when you come.”

I reach into the bedside drawer and bring out her bullet vibrator, passing it to her. “Use this.”

I stroke myself as she switches on the vibe. Her face lights up as she moves it around her clit, her body on display for me in the most obscene way, her top half still covered but her pussy glistening and as beautiful as it ever was.

I can’t resist much longer. I give her a few more seconds before settling above her body. Holding her thighs, I ease into her, watching the vibe moving faster.

“Fuck me,” she says. “Give it to me, Alexsei. I need it.”

“I’m going to come in you,” I tell her. “Because you’re mine.”

“I’m yours. Do it, come in me.”

I slam back and forth until in the same instant we both reach a climax strong enough to make me roar like an animal. I thrust

deep a final time, more spurting from me, squeezed by the contractions of her pussy as she shakes with the power of her orgasm.

I slide free, rolling onto my side, an arm draped over her. "I'm glad you've moved in," I tell her, kissing her neck. "Rather than into your house."

"It was never my house. It was my father's and I want nothing to do with it."

"What about the money from the sale?"

"Going to a battered women's shelter. I don't want it."

"I love you."

"I know." She turns to smile at me. "Did I mention I love you too?"

"Not that I recall."

"Well, I do. Thinking of forgiving you for using me as bait as well."

"Really?"

"Not yet, but sometime soon. As long as you keep doing things like that to me."

"Now that's a promise I can guarantee I will keep."

"Good. Fancy joining me in the shower?"

"I give the orders around here."

She gets to her feet. "What's your command, my husband?"

"Get in the shower and I'll join you."

"Oh, no. How awful." She winks, grins, flashes her ass and then heads through to the bathroom. I get to my feet, stripping out of my clothes as I hear the water switching on. I smile to myself as I head through.

"What are you grinning about?" she asks, climbing under the steaming water and running her hands through her hair.

"I brought you into my life to destroy you but you ended up saving me."

“I guess I did. You’re welcome, by the way.”

“Don’t get cocky. I’ve warned you already.”

“Or you’ll spank me? Oh, no. How awful.”

I climb into the shower and take hold of her. “I can do a lot more than spank you for misbehaving.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep.”

“I don’t. Now get clean so I can get you dirty again.”

“Ordering me around again?”

“That’s right.”

“You’re my husband.” She reaches down and squeezes my cock, lowering herself to her knees. “And your wish is my command.”

MILA

I grunt, trying to remember the breathing I was taught. I don't want to hyperventilate, not now.

"Take it easy," the midwife says. "Try to relax."

"Yeah, sure, because this is a relaxing thing to do. I've trying to shove a baby out of me and you're telling me to chill?" I groan in pain. "Why did I agree to this?"

Alexsei squeezes my hand. "It'll be okay."

"You try doing it sometime."

"You can punch me if it helps."

"I haven't got the energy. Oh, shit. Another contraction." I wince as it rocks through my body. Alexsei's hand is crushed but he doesn't wince, just gives me that calm expression he's had on his face since we got to hospital.

It helps even if I can't tell him. Nothing phases him. When we had that scare halfway through the pregnancy, he was calmer than the doctors. "Nothing to be gained by panicking," he told me afterward. "It'll be all right."

I hope he's right on that. It doesn't feel right. The pain is intolerable but then with one more push, I get a hint of the light at the end of the tunnel.

"That's it," the doctor says, nodding encouragement. "You're crowning. You can do it. One more big push and he'll be out."

I grunt, squeezing Alexsei, cursing so loudly I'm surprised they don't think I need an exorcism. Then I feel something

shifting and I look down. There he is. A hint of hair on his head.

The rest is over in minutes. He slides from me as his shoulders come free. Alexsei cuts the cord and then our baby is on my chest and I'm sobbing with relief as the mite wails loudly.

"Our little boy," Alexsei says, kissing my forehead and touching his head at the same time with gentle fingers. "You did it."

"Is it all there?" I ask. "Nothing missing?"

The doctor is counting fingers and toes. "Everything is where it should be," he says, grinning. "Congratulations, Mrs. Volkov. You have a gorgeous baby boy. Do we have a name?"

"Hugo," I say. "Turns out this big galumph is a big Les Miserables fan."

The doctor raises his eyebrows. "The musical?"

"The book," Alexsei says in a growl. "I do not care for the musical."

"Cried when he watched it," I say as he turns his laser eyes on me. "Only kidding." I stick my tongue out as our baby shifts in place, letting out a grumble and promptly falling asleep.



I jolt awake, sitting up in bed and frowning. I glance at the cot beside the bed. Hugo's still fast asleep. "What is it?" Alexsei asks, sitting up beside me. "You're covered in sweat. Are you all right?"

"Nothing. I was dreaming about the birth, that's all."

"Oh." He kisses the side of my neck, leaning over me to look at the cot. "Thought he might have woken you."

"Not this time. I can't believe it's been a month since he came into our lives. How did we ever have a life without him in it?"

"I feel the same. It's like he's always been here."

"Not having any regrets with the night time feeds and the diaper changes and the interrupted sleep every single night?"

“Wouldn’t change a thing. I have my wife and my child. I have my family. What more could a man want?”

“I don’t know. A decent sleep, maybe?”

“It won’t be like this for long. Soon he’ll sleep through and so will we. Rest, now.”

I obey him as I always do. Well, as I mostly do. Laid on my back a minute later, I feel his arm snaking over my side as he wraps around me, making me feel safe. Hugo stirs, making a noise like a laugh. “What do you think he’s dreaming about?” I ask.

“Milk, probably.”

“Doesn’t have a lot of worries, does he?”

“Nor do we, not anymore.”

“Still got some.”

“Your gallery being so successful we need a bigger building does not count as a major worry.”

“No, I meant worrying that you might get bored of me now you have an heir, boot me out and keep him.”

“You think that is possible?” He kisses me lightly. “I love you. You don’t get rid of me that easily.”

“Not having second thoughts about love being real?”

“Not for one second. Now rest. That’s an order.”

I take one more look at our son before closing my eyes. He’ll be awake soon and wanting feeding but for now I can rest. We have help during the daytime.

Alexsei offered it for the nights but I refused. I want to be there when he wakes up, do what needs doing. I want to look after him same as Alexsei looks after me.

He has his family and so do I. My father is gone. Diego is gone. Alexsei is no longer talking about taking over the entire country. All that occupies his thoughts now are how best to support Hugo and me.

I feel loved. I feel protected. I feel happy. What more could any woman ask for? I even have a vacant lot down near the beach, ready to be turned into a bigger art gallery than my existing one.

As soon as I can spare the time.

There's no rush though. For now, I'm happy painting during my few free moments, enjoying life with my family the rest of the time.

The future can wait. For now, I'm getting through each day with a lot of smiles, a lot of love, and plenty of cups of coffee.

As for Alexsei, turns out he can change. He can admit his emotions. Only when not of his employees are around but baby steps and all that.

He's even taken up painting. Who'd have guessed?

I listen to Alexsei's breathing and Hugo's breathing and settle down, my heart slow and steady. I count slowly backwards from ten.

By the time I get to four, I'm fast asleep between my husband and my child, exactly where I want to be.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

If you enjoyed this book, please consider leaving an honest review.

As an indie writer, I'm learning as I go and all feedback is appreciated. Feel free to join [my Facebook reader's group](#) to chat to other fans and post any corrections, comments, or suggestions for future books.

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